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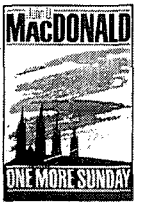
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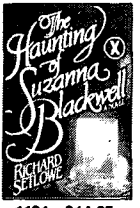
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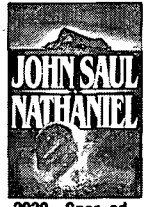
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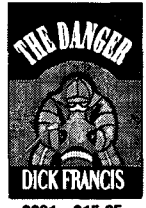
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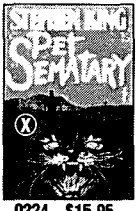
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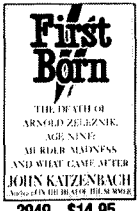
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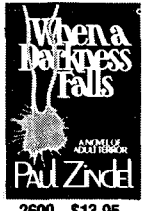
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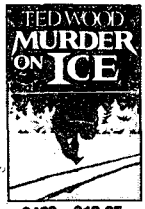
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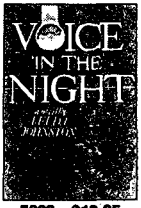
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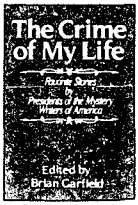
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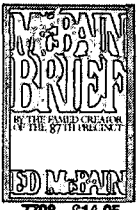
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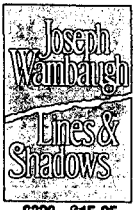
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We are very pleased to say that "Season Pass" by Chet Williamson, published in AHMM last fall, has received a nomination from the Mystery Writers of America for Best Short Story of 1984. Special congratulations to Mr. Williamson! The complete list of nominees:

"By Dawn's Early Light" by Lawrence Block *(Playboy,* August 1984, and *The Eyes Have It,* published by The Mysterious Press)
"The Reluctant Detective" by Michael Z. Lewin *(The Eyes Have It,* The Mysterious Press)
"Breakfast at Ojai" by Robert Twohy (EQMM, September 1984)
"After I'm Gone" by Donald Westlake (EQMM, June 1984, and *Levine,* The Mysterious Press)
"Season Pass" by Chet Williamson (AHMM, October 1984)

The 1984 MWA awards will be presented in New York in May, at the 40th annual Edgar Allan Poe Awards Dinner.

In the meantime, heartiest congratulations also to Rob Kantner, whose first novel—*and* his second—have been sold to Bantam Books. Working title of the first one: *The Back Door Man;* both are Ben Perkins mysteries. We are very nearly as delighted about this as Rob Kantner himself, as Perkins's cases were first published in AHMM, starting with "C Is for Cookie" in September, 1982. And there's a new one in this issue, "Perfect Pitch."

We'll keep you posted about the books' publication dates.

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Lois Adams,** Managing Editor; **Cindy Goldman,** Editorial Assistant; **Ralph Rubino,** Art Director; **Gerry Hawkins,** Associate Art Director; **Ron Kuliner,** Art Editor; **Marianne Weldon,** Associate Designer; **Theresa Parisi,** Art Assistant; **Carl Bartee,** Director of Manufacturing; **Carole Dixon,** Production Manager; **Lauren C. Council,** Production Assistant; **Cynthia Manson,** Director, Subsidiary Rights; **Barbara Bazyn,** Manager, Contracts & Permissions; **Louise Mugar,** Circulation Director, Retail Marketing; **Jay Bresnehan,** Circulation Planning Director; **Priscilla Garston,** Circulation Director, Subscriptions; **Irene Bozoki,** Classified Advertising Director; **Jamie Fillon,** Advertising Manager; **William F. Battista,** Advertising Director (New York: 212-557-9100; Chicago: 312- 346-0712; Los Angeles: 213-785-3114).

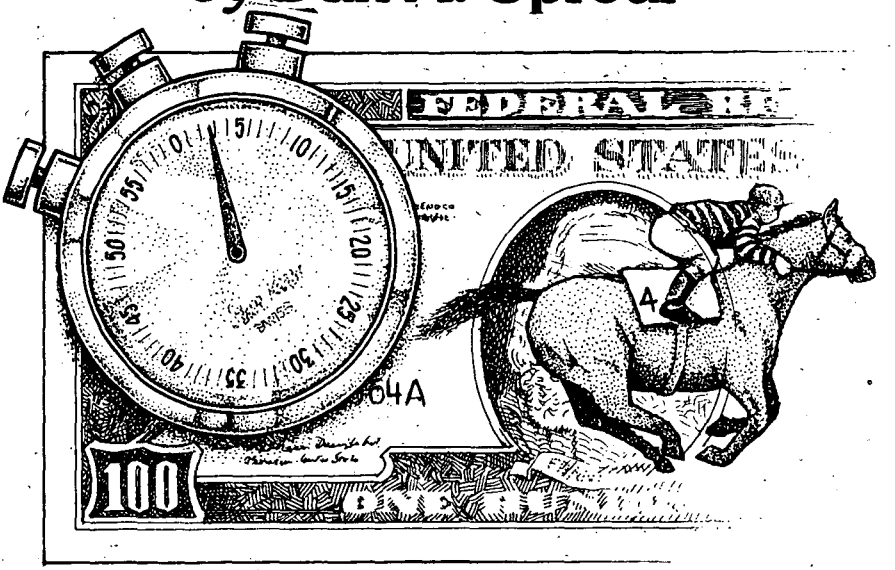
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FICTION

The Sweetiepie Caper

by Dan A. Sproul



The name is Closeup Joe, which is not really my name. I got the name Closeup Joe maybe twenty years ago from Piano George Odom. The way it happened, a bunch of us boys was playing some poker on Milligan's back stoop up in North Miami. Piano George, who is pounding piano in several joints about town and booking bets when possible, strolls in on the game, looking to drum up a little business. "How about you, kid?" he sez to me. "Want anything tomorrow at Tropical Park?"

Well, I don't want to look foolish about such things amongst this bunch, so I pick up a *Tele-*

Illustration by Steve Karras

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graph laying nearby for a look-see at what's running, just like I know what I'm doing. Ends up I put a sawbuck on some dinosaur that don't win and isn't long remembered, as it turns out.

George whips out his pencil. "So what's the name, kid?"

"Joe Campbell," I tell him.

"Not your last name, dumbbell! What you want, I should write your name on a betting slip so's any schmuck what comes stumblin' by can read it?"

I sit there listening to him with a jack-high flush tight against my chest, since I don't trust none of the bums walkin' around behind me any farther than I can toss Milligan's old woman, who stands fourteen hands and don't go a gram under three hundred eighty pounds without her boots.

"You'll be Closeup Joe," Piano George decides.

"Huh?" sez I.

"The way you got your cards —close up to your chest. Now let's see the tenner."

It's been Closeup Joe ever since. I tell you about the name so maybe you don't think I'm blowing your dress up when I mention names like Longshot Louie Lobinowitz, the Mighty Moe, Vinnie the Book, and some of the others involved in the Vi's Sweetiepie caper.

It all begins about the middle of December. The Tropical at Calder meet is just about petered out. Hialeah is getting geared up for the mid-winter date. The plan was for me, Longshot Louie, Pedro Ortez the Cuban, and the Mighty Moe, whose last name hasn't ever come to my attention, to pool our bankrolls on a sleeping speedball guaranteed by the Moe. The major purpose of said plan being to put the big hurt on Vinnie the Book (the same who gnaws away at our vitals lo these many years).

Louie, who one might say is in a perpetual state of tapped-out, soon withdraws from our action, seeing as how he is busted and already into Vinnie for eight hundred fish. A visit from Pattycake Bellini is greatly feared by Louie, so much so that Louie goes off all of a sudden to visit his sister in Georgia. Now Pattycake, I should tell you, is composed of two hundred eighty pounds of unreasoning hate, with the disposition of a rabid bulldog. He gets the name because he likes to play pattycake on a player's features while inquiring after the payment of funds due his long-time employer, Vinnie the Book.

Despite Louie's departure, we still scrape up five hundred big ones to send in on a seventeen-to-one shot with the unlikely

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name of Dog Dip. Dog Dip, to our delight, does a wire act on the field of buffaloes he faces, and we swiftly snap it off of Vinnie to the tune of nine grand.

When payday comes down, Vinnie pays off with much congrats and more than ordinary good will. But it's just bookie business. We all clearly understand he would, in a New York second, cut out his grandma's heart for a quarter.

With my three yards, I build a garage for my old woman. This knocks hell out of my bankroll. But gets her off my case temporarily, although the garage will be most appreciated once I can afford to spring for a car.

Several weeks later we are seated comfortably in Delaney's Pub on Seventy-ninth Street, celebrating in solid jubilation while listening to the Mighty Moe rattle on about the total worthlessness of horse trainers and assorted racetrack personnel. Trainers, according to the Moe, ought to be grouped into four categories: adequate, incompetent, stupid, and mentally deranged. Jockeys, of course, with just a few exceptions, should be taken out and shot. Except apprentice jockeys, they should first be thoroughly strangled and then shot. Pedro, who does not expound English too hot, proposes a toast which nobody understands. About then, slithering around the tables, comes Longshot Louie Lobinowitz, back from Georgia.

"Longshot!" yells the Moe, who glimpses him first. "You should get out with your life. The Pattycake has been seen in company with a large hammer. Surgery on your kneecaps is most probable."

"*Sí,*" Pedro pipes up. "No let sleeping mad dog lay in noonday sun." Pedro never did talk good, but he don't get this bad until he starts takin' night classes in English idioms, whatever they are, from the Cuban skirt he's chasing after. Or as Pedro puts it, "I am much enameled for her."

But back to Louie. Instead of heeding the Moe's advice, he plops down and helps hisself to Pedro's mug of beer. "Not to worry," he tells the Moe. "I have gleaned information today that will square me with Vinnie, in spades."

"Pattycake ain't known to be trifled with," the Moe points out with cunning insight. "He suffers a serious mental disorder, he thinks he is a human being."

Ignoring the Moe, which isn't difficult because the Moe is very short and skinny unless he is drunk, Louie chugs the dregs of Pedro's beer and begins his

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spiel."I was at the track yesterday with this," whereupon he puts before us, on the table amidst the spilled beer, a magnificent stopwatch of the expensive category. The timepiece, he divulges, is given to him by his sister for his birthday while he is hibernating up in Georgia.

"No es enough for paying him, the Pattycake," Pedro is smart enough to see at once.

"Forget the bum," Louie advises. "I have discovered the key to our collective riches." Now, it is unlike Louie to dish up information he can use for his ownself unless he is putting out the stiff to better his own price. What is more unlike Louie is calling the Pattycake a bum out loud without he looks to see whose ears are open. But I give him a square listen.

"I am standing at the rail, waiting for the break," Louie begins. "I figure to check my new watch against the tote time. You know . . . to make sure it's working okay. So the gate opens. I start the watch out. Now, it's six furlongs, you know?" He points to a tiny button on the watch. "If you push this, it stops the time on this little clock here, so's you can get a read on the fractions. When the leader hits the half-mile pole, I go ahead and punch it so's I can see what he does the quarter in. The little clock stops at 22.2 for the quarter. But a squint at the tote time sez he goes in 24.1. So what kinda lousy watch I got here, I sez to myself? I don't get no time to answer myself, since already they are coming to the wire. When they finish, I hit the other button here." He points to the other button for our benefit. "The watch gets the six panels in 111.2, only when I look up at the toteboard, it sez 113 flat." He pauses to reach for the Moe's mug, but the Moe slides it away from him and takes a slug his ownself.

"Anyway," Louie goes on, "I figure I buggered something up. So I reset the watch and run up to the seller's windows to watch the replay on the TV monitors. Only it's the same story . . . 111.2. I check a couple more races. Each time the stopwatch is the same with the tote timer. It was just that first race. So . . . okay, I don't say diddly to nobody. Today I go back to the track just before noon to catch the reruns of yesterday's races. I time the race once more. Same thing— 111.2 —and right there, posted on the screen, the official time is shown as 113 flat. And this was a sixty-five hundred dollar claiming race. Now, is this a piece of information or what?"

The Moe uses his sleeve to blot the foam off his mustache. The mustache is colossal enough

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to take a lot of sleeve. "It is all so very interesting," sez the Moe. "But does not mean nothin'—time only counts on TV game shows." It is widely realized that the Moe, to back a selection, only needs to find out who the horse ever beats. But the Moe is known to be wrong on numerous occasions, so I feel put upon to enter my two cents.

"Wait a minute. We are talkin' here about two seconds—ten lengths." I direct my appeal to Moe.

"Mighty Moe, you know there ain't a claimer at Calder running for under twenty thousand that can do six furlongs in eleven and two. Don't you figure this animal has got to win next time out? I don't see no cheap claimer beatin' him."

"Maybe," he sez in a cagey fashion, concentrating on his empty glass. It is a signal for me to order another round, including Louie, who is eyeballing my brew with consistency. When the same arrives, the Moe inhales half his suds in a single motion, indicating a change in plans. I will need to go to the six dollar pitcher on the next round.

"What's the name of the fireball who wins this race?" the Moe asks Louie.

"Ah . . . now if I tell you that, you will be informed like myself. Before I say, I need you guys to promise to get enough down for me to cover what I owe Vinnie."

The Moe's beer-frosted mustache begins to look like an ancient, drowning chipmunk. "We can find out easy enough," he warns Louie, flashing a wicked, foam-covered grin.

"Sure you can find out," Louie quickly admits. "But I'm bringing it to your attention. That ought to be worth something."

"You can lead the horse to water, but no can be putting in the mouth a gift," Pedro announces.

Louie gives him a strange look. "What's he talking about?"

"Nobody ever knows," the Moe informs him. We all waste a few seconds watching Pedro work on his beer.

"Well, what about it?" Louie wants to know, moving his chair a few more scrapes away from Pedro. At this point we hold a serious debate, the upshot of which is agreeing to put the dough in for Louie. I state same to him, and he replies: "Vi's Sweetiepie."

"Wait," sez the Moe. "This holstein is known to me. He don't break 112.3 in his dismal career. Closeup's old woman outruns him the last quarter mile." This naturally means Sweetiepie is not much of a selection because my old woman

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gets out of breath making toast in the morning.

"He must be improved," Louie puts forth, then grabs up the stopwatch and shakes it in the Moe's face. "This watch don't lie."

"It ain't the watch's lying that worries me."

"It don't surprise me," is Louie's catchy comeback. "I know you ain't going to believe me, so I got Hernandez to go up in the track library and make a copy of the race tape. You can time it yourself."

Hernandez is an ardent plunger and known to us all. Being a stringer for the Miami *Tribune* with a press pass, he can get away with that kind of stuff. Since we find complete distrust a wonderful basis for our relationship, Louie's foresight works to impress us in earnest. But none of us own a video tape player. Louie, however, comes through again, suggesting we meet over at Milo's porn shop the next afternoon. Milo has more video tape players than Sony. He is strongly into porno, but the large money comes from making bootleg tape copies of first-run movies.

As the evening wears on, we decide among us to come up with fifteen hundred clams to put on Vi's Sweetiepie. This is if we get the same clocking on the video tape. While we all approach a state of extremely drunk, the Moe delivers onto us his own theory on how the time difference comes to be.

"It's like this, see. When the starter hits the button to open up the gate, what's he doin'—what's he doin'?"

Pedro cannot answer because he is passed out on the table. I shrug my ignorance, not being able to figure out what it is I should answer. Louie drinks from the pitcher because he has lost his glass and does not appear interested any longer.

"He is starting the clock!" the Moe shouts at our faces. "He starts the clock, see, but the gate—when he mashes the button—the gate don't open. So what's he do? He mashes down the button again. This time the gate opens. Out they go, but the clock is already running for almost two seconds. Ya see?"

Right about now, Louie gets up and stumbles out the door, leaving only the Moe and my ownself among the conscious. It is becoming difficult for us to continue our conversation because of the high fidelity of Pedro's snores, which are starting to wake up the other two customers.

It is with an engorged noggin that I meet up with the Moe and Louie the next afternoon in the parking lot be-

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hind Milo's place. Pedro, I am informed by the Moe, is already inside, watching a new epic release about football just obtained by Milo entitled *Cynthia Plays Wide Receiver*. Since there is a three-fifty viewing fee, we stay outside discussing the various ways of beating the pick-six at Hialeah. When it's over and Pedro comes out with the three other patrons, we go in and explain to Milo what it is we want. Now, Milo is not an easy man to deal with. He can turn a buck quicker than the great Marco C. changes whip hands, and is much despised because he is a stonehearted chalk player who doesn't realize what the word favor means. Five bucks gets his attention quickly. Stopwatches come out when Louie gives him the tape. Except for Pedro: he drags out a 1959 vintage Bulova Cadet with a sweep second hand and no crystal cover.

The Moe has with him a copy of the advance *Form*. In it is the result chart of the race showing the exact finish and other stuff, including the time, which is listed as Louie states, 113. Then, Milo starts the tape.

They move the last horse into the gate. At the bottom of the picture it shows the date as December 17, 1982, race number three. So we know at least Milo is showing us the right race. The date and stuff go off the screen, and the camera concentrates on the gate full of horses while we finger our watches in a sweaty fashion.

Bang—out they come. The watches are ticking. The eleven horse comes over from the outside. It's the three, six, eleven—all three abreast—matching strides going into the three-eighths turn. "Twenty-two and two for the quarter," the Moe mumbles. This helps, since I get so tied up in the race I don't remember to check it.

The leaders make the stretch turn a bit wide. It looks like they are about to toss it in, except for the six, who keeps on going. Meanwhile, the number four horse does the stretch turn on the inside like a Maserati. He catches the six inside the sixteenth pole in deep stretch to go on and win it by three —maybe four—lengths with no visible strain.

I get the race in 111.4 but realize I'm a bit late with the finish. I ask the Moe what he gets.

The Moe is looking at his timepiece in a strange manner, as if he might give it a shake to see if it's running. "Eleven and change," he confirms, with no sign of elation.

After the pack goes by the finish, the scene changes to a closeup of the toteboard. This prompts me to debase myself

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completely and apologize to Louie.

"Louie, by God, you are correct. I can tell you now, with some shame, there was much doubt on my part." I can afford to be humble, since the official time shown on the tote is 113 and a veritable killing appears in the making.

The Moe bumps me in midsentence with his elbow. "Save it," he whispers in my ear.

When we get back outside, it is agreed we will meet in an hour at Delaney's to plan our strategy over a cool one or two. The Moe remains clammed up. This is not ordinary. Louie takes off. Pedro goes back into Milo's. When they are gone, the Moe clamps onto my elbow and gives me the bum's rush down the street. We get halfway down the block before he turns me loose. "What I look like?" he yells. "Like I fell off a Christmas tree?"

I don't have a glimmer of what he's yammering about, and I tell him so. His face is all red. He's kind of jumping up and down without leaving the ground.

"You're a dumbbell, is why you don't know. If that is a sixty-five hundred dollar claiming race we was watchin', then so am I."

I am flabbergasted. "What are you saying? You saw your ownself. The time is 113, they finished 4-6-3-8 on the board. What's the prob—"

"They diddled with the tape. Did you see who finishes fifth?" When he sees on my face that I have missed this point, he tells me the answer. "The eleven horse ran fifth."

"So?"

He sticks the chart in my face. "So it says here the nine horse ran fifth. What ya make of that?"

"Could be an error."

He now shakes the chart at me. "The chart sez the number one horse is in the lead through the half mile—didn't see him up there, did you?" I don't get the chance to answer because there is more coming. "The eleven horse in the chart don't get within fifteen lengths of the leader, finishes tenth. Is that what happened?"

It becomes clear to me the Moe has stumbled onto something. With my own eyes I see the eleven horse on the lead into the final turn. "It is a setup," I shout.

"A setup, hell," sez the Moe. "This is a scam of the first order. And Louie does not have the equipment upstairs for anything more ingenious than a two-horse parlay. I am picking up the stink of Vinnie the Book. This is some heavy-handed larceny."

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A half hour later we are in Delaney's sucking on a beer and awaiting the arrival of Longshot Louie the traitor. The Moe has the *Form* spread out on the table.

"The result chart is the fingerprint of the race," he sez to me. "No two races develop exactly the same way. The bum almost had me sold . . . almost. But there is one other thing."

"Yeah, what?"

"According to the chart, Vi's Sweetiepie is a chestnut gelding. The horse we saw win was blacker than Milo's soul. I still don't figure how they did the tote and all. But it's of little concern because it's eight to five Louie tells us."

We have a chance to soon find out. Louie comes strutting in about then like he just found a twenty in the parking lot.

The Moe greets him with a cheesy grin. "Well, my good friend Louie, have a chair. Allow us to stand you to a beer."

Louie, all smiles, plants hisself at the table, quite enjoyin' the status. Once he is comfortable, with a beer in his hand, the Moe leans across the table. He puts his adequate snout about four inches from Louie's traitorous features.

"All right, you piece of snot. Start from the beginning. What's Vinnie coughin' up to put the stiff on us?"

I grab Louie's arm before he escapes completely from the chair. Holding him there is a mere nothing because he is not much bigger than the Moe. This makes him almost a midget.

"Wait, boys. You got me all wrong. It's my life at stake here we're talking about."

"Let's hear the whole story, Louie," sez the Moe, dropping back into his chair. "And keep it short or Closeup is goin' to break your arm at the elbow in several distinct pieces."

I would be reluctant to do as the Moe threatens, but Louie seems convinced he's done for, no matter what.

"They grabbed me when I got off the bus from Georgia. My ratfink sister . . . I figure she wants to make sure I don't come back. I made it up about the watch. Vinnie, he give it to me to use. My sister wouldn't give me the sweat off her . . . "

"What about the tape!" the Moe yells at him. "We don't give a damn about your sister's sweat."

"They got this tape Milo has doctored," Louie tells us, whereupon he pauses to drain his mug. "Vinnie is still sore about the nine grand. If you guys buy the tape and drop back some of the money, Vinnie tells me he'll let me off the hook for some of the eight bills I'm into him for. I don't know if this

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is so or not because Vinnie isn't fond of the truth. But he don't offer me a choice. If I don't do it, Pattycake sez he will strangle me with my own intestines."

"How does Milo diddle with the tape?" the Moe wants to know.

Louie reaches for my beer. I mash his hand on the table.

"Ow . . ." He gives me a look like I got a dead insect in my hair. "Damn, that hurt, Closeup." He spends too long rubbing his hand. He can see the Moe is getting antsy.

"The way I get it," he blurts out, "they spliced the beginning of the Vi's Sweetiepie race, showing the date, race number, and such, to the front end of the race they picked out from a couple of years ago—allowance horses which finished in the same order in a better time. At the point they come out of the gate, you are watching an allowance race two years old. After the finish, when the camera switches to show the tote, Milo just spliced in the results board from the Vi's Sweetiepie race. It looks foolproof. I don't see how you caught on."

"What do you mean foolproof?" I say to him. "You calling us fools?"

"Just an expression."

The Moe studies his *Form* a few seconds. "Amazing, ain't it, what that scab Milo will do for money?"

"Not just money," Louie tosses in, rubbing the arm where I have left somewhat of an impression. "Milo is Vinnie's brother-in-law; also, he gave Milo twenty bucks to do the tape."

This revelation don't much please the Moe. "And the chiselin' manure bag puts it in us for a fiver to roll a bogus tape." It so much perturbs him, he does not realize at once he has set his mug of beer down on the Past Performance for Tampa Bay Downs. He takes it off quick-like, but a wet ring spreads out. This is a sacrilege of unpardonable proportions. "Damn that Milo. Look what he made me do."

Pedro wanders in about then. I explain to him what is going on with Louie and the tape, and convince him to spring for a six dollar pitcher.

"A fool and hees money are the root of all evil," is Pedro's parting shot on his way to the bar. When he returns and the mugs are filled, Louie begins to give out with little whimpering noises, and personal comments.

"I am already a dead man. I am walking around and talking, but I am a dead man. I am breathing and talking and . . ."

"Shut up, Louie," the Moe orders. "I can't think while listen-

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ing to your death throes."

"So, how many we bet on Sweetiepie now?" Pedro asks me in his Cuban innocence. He don't understand English any better than what he talks it. So I explain to him again.

"Pedro, we can't bet Sweetiepie. The race at Milo's was a put-on. Vinnie knows Sweetiepie don't have no chance to win, so he gets us to put all our dough on him so he can get back some of the nine thousand."

"*Sí, sí . . .*" Pedro is bobbing his head like he understands. But he will fool you that way.

"That's it!" the Moe shouts, raising his five feet two inches into the air with some velocity. He bangs the *Form* with the palm of his hand. Louie jumps so bad he dumps his beer in his lap. "It is as plain as the nose on Closeup's face."

I should tell you the Moe considers my nose large. But the Moe his ownself has a beezer that belongs in *Believe It or Not.*

"We are idiots," the Moe announces. "With the exception of me . . . Closeup, you said it. Vinnie knows Sweetiepie don't have no chance to win. If he can be sure of it, he must know who *is* goin' to win. He must have the race in his pocket."

Since Vi's Sweetiepie is entered in the first race at Calder the very next afternoon, the Moe turns his *Form* to the Calder Past Performances to begin a systematic study of the entries. Finally he comes up for air and to take some brew.

"This race stinks. I don't see nothing here." He jabs his finger down on the number one entry. "I know this horse, Shadow Chaser. I see cement blocks roll faster than he comes out of the gate. Look at the favorite, Blazing Bill. His fire is out. He runs like a camel. Vi's Sweetiepie we can toss out. And here, Filthy Melvin, drops from seventeen thousand claiming. He don't get within thirty lengths of the leader in the last three months, thirty-six lengths back last time out. And his trainer, Big Bob Tucker, is an imbecile. I remember he has a four-year-old maiden filly once. She don't go three furlongs without she folds up like a flea-market card table. So with the stupid oozing out of his ears, he sends her a mile and a quarter on the grass against allowance horses. Had to take the heart out of the poor thing . . . didn't even finish."

"Wait a minute," Louie breaks in. "Big Bob trains for Acorn Stables, don't he?"

The Moe squints back down at his *Form*. "Acorn Stables owns Filthy Melvin, so what?"

"Maybe nothin'. But I was talking to Herman the Horseshoer several months ago back

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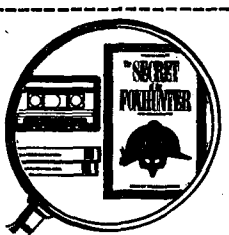
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at a Big Daddy's over in Miami Springs. He mentions as how he has done some work for Acorn Stables. This is until he goes through his unfortunate string of forty consecutive losers and must hock his equipment and sell his truck."

"I don't get the point," the Moe complains.

"I don't give it yet," sez Louie. "The point is, Herman tells me in passing that Benny Silva has a big chunk of Acorn Stables."

It occurs to me right here what it is Longshot is giving us. So I toss it into the conversation for the Moe's enlightenment. "Silva is Vinnie the Book's last name."

Louie leans back in his chair, mug to lips, quite happy with hisself. Like a racing secretary just handing out a hundred forty pounds for some chump to load on his champion handicap horse. "They are brothers," he informs the Moe.

"Of course, I should see it right away," the Moe admits. "Look at the bum riding Filthy Melvin the last three months. Aron Lombriz, he holds more horses in his career than the Belmont receiving barn. It becomes obvious they are holding Melvin for three months, dropping him a little after each race—just settin' up this killin'. I remember last year Melvin was smoking around the track. He made them hotshot New York sprinters look like they shipped in from the Hollywood Dog Track. See what they're doin'—they wait till he's in with a bunch of crows. Where all he has to do is gallop. And they let him loose. Already they are countin' the money."

"What's the morning line on Melvin?" I asked the Moe.

"He's fifteen to one on the graded entries. He looks worse on paper. The only thing botherin' me is Big Bob Tucker. He don't even toss somebody the bird without he uses the wrong finger. I always say the trainer ought to be smarter than his horse, but it don't always work out, as you can see in this case."

"You gotta make a bet on Vi's Sweetiepie with Vinnie," Louie whines. "You owe me—I told you about his brother. If Vinnie don't see some of that nine thousand back, it's goodbye Louie. He's gonna think I tipped you to the scam."

"We ain't wasting no cash on that goat," I inform him. But the Moe surprises me.

"Naturally we put some bread on Sweetiepie. You want Vinnie to think we got wise? Vinnie is a royal swine, but he ain't altogether stupid. Closeup, you go down to the Gladiola Bar and put down two—let's make it look good—put down three hundred on Sweetiepie. We send

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Pedro down to Coral Gables with five hundred to that Cuban — what's-his-face — Vinnie's got running bets down there. I go up to see Milky, who's running bets for him in Lauderdale, and plunk down another five hundred. So we get a thousand down on Melvin and tear out Vinnie's guts."

I do some arithmetic on the table. At a mere fifteen to one, we stand to burn Vinnie for sixteen thousand. A sum of some considerable worth, not likely to be turned loose of by Vinnie routinely. I voice my fear of a possible welsh to the Moe. He gives me a look of disbelief.

"Bookmakers of Vinnie's status in the community do not welsh," he advises me. "It may even be against the law."

So we scatter in our various directions. Pedro to his Cuban connection in the Gables, the Moe to Lauderdale. We take the precaution to leave two full pitchers with Louie to be sure we can find him later. It takes two hours to get to the Gladiola Bar in Hialeah. This is because the bus service in and about Miami is less than wonderful. But I don't want to squander fourteen bucks on a ten minute cab ride.

Vinnie's office is located in a back booth of the Gladiola near the pay phone, around the corner from the men's room. He is on the phone with a customer when I arrive. But he gives me a motion to take a seat in his office booth, which I do. Pattycake is not around, which is a comfort, but only means he is probably out crackin' bones someplace.

Vinnie is soon finished. He meets me with glad tidings and much fanfare.

"My wealthy friend, Closeup. The news of your good fortune has spread rapidly. I have taken on additional clientele, thanks to your score. I thought you should know."

We both know he is lying through his teeth, of which one is missing in the front thanks to No Nose Jacoby, who was a dedicated sore loser and is now quite dead since shortly after the tooth business. I lay the three hundred on the table.

"I wish to make a small wager on the first tomorrow at Calder."

"Well . . . I don't know about a horse bet right now . . . " he hedges. "I'm heavy into the football season. I can give you the Jets and three over the Dolphins." This sounds like a good deal. I'm tempted to put ten on the Dolphins, but realize I am there on a matter of some importance.

"Are you saying you ain't going to take my bet?"

"Well, I don't know. Three hundred is chickenfeed—hardly

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worth fooling with. Maybe if you could make it a bit more . . . I have to handle it on the side, you understand. You'll have to make it worth my while. And my time is worth somethin'."

"You sound like some wrinklebutt lawyer," I tell him. Anybody can see him and Milo are related somehow. He begins to irritate me in the first degree.

"In some ways I am like a lawyer. I perform a service—I'm a professional man of sorts."

"You're a professional bookmaker," I reminded him. No way you could call him an amateur, and you couldn't get eight to five that his mommy was, either. I pick up the money off the table and toss it back down again. "This is called a bet. It's all the cash I can raise because I built a garage for my old woman. It took most of my bankroll."

"Your credit's good, Closeup. You know that. Make it a thousand and I'll cuff you the other seven hundred, the usual terms."

I find myself in a dilemma, but I figure I can square it with Moe and Pedro easy enough later.

"Five hundred," I offer. "Two on the cuff. All to win on Vi's Sweetiepie, the first tomorrow at Calder."

He grins wide enough for me to see the space in his teeth. "I should tell you to take it to the track, Closeup. But seeing as how you are a longtime customer . . ." He scoops up the dough and notes the transaction in his book.

The bus I ride back to Delaney's breaks an axle near Twenty-second Avenue, so I walk the rest of the twelve blocks. I am not surprised to see everybody beats me back. They are steadily downing brew when I walk in, except Longshot. He is staring glassy-eyed at a picture of the Light Brigade Charge hanging over the backbar, no longer able to lift hand to glass.

"It's all a bust," the Moe tells me. "I spent an hour in Hollywood changing buses, another hour riding around—for nothing. The little cockroach don't take my bet when he finds out it's on Filthy Melvin. I shoulda guessed. Vinnie put out the word. He ain't gonna get stung on his own fix."

"What about Pedro?" I ask.

The Moe shrugs. "Who can understand him?"

I have the best luck figuring out what Pedro's talking, so I have a go at it. "Did you make the bet, Pedro?"

"Qué dice?"

Sometimes he dummies up like this, so I change tactics. "El betto. Makee el betto on el

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caballo?" He shakes his head in bewilderment. But I don't give in. *"No dinero, no cerveza. Hombre Cubano,* Coral Gabelo?"

"O, sí, entiendo . . . eh, *Miraflores no está* . . . he no es in city. In hospital, Cleveland, Ohio. No have bet on Sweetiepie."

"No Sweetiepie," I tell him again. "We want betto Filthy Melvin. *Comprendo*—Filthy Melvin!"

"Sí, sí, comprendo, no is clean. Something she is rotten in woodpile."

"We are cursed," the Moe sez. "He shouldn't be allowed to handle money—he shouldn't be allowed period."

"So what we gonna do now?" I ask the Moe, who at the time is fooling around trying to keep Louie's right eye shut.

"Look at this bum," he sez to me. "He's zonked all the way out, but his eye don't stay shut. You ever see anything like that?" He gives up on Louie's eye to work on his beer. "We got a problem," he admits after several swallows. "If we dump a thousand on Melvin through the mutuel windows, the chalk jumpers are gonna dump on him like a pigpen full of starvin' swine, goin' for a celery stalk. But I don't see we got no choice. How do you make out with Vinnie?"

"He's reluctant to accept such a piddling wager. Ends up he does, though." I decide not to tell him about the extra two hundred, seeing the ghastly mood he's in. I figure I can make it up out of my end of the Filthy Melvin score.

By the time we leave Delaney's, Longshot does not come 'round. Pedro helps me stash him in my old woman's garage on some flattened out cardboard boxes to sleep it off. It is decided we will all meet in front of Delaney's the next morning to catch the racetrack special. The plan is for Pedro, the Moe, and me to each plunk down three hundred on Melvin just a minute or two before post time, so the chalk watchers don't jump on him too bad.

When I wake up Saturday morning, my mouth feels like the Boston Marathoners wrung their socks out in there. It's already nine-thirty, my old woman is still snoring seeing as how she don't go to work on Saturdays. To my surprise, when I trudge out to the old woman's garage, I find Louie has fled. This is before I get a chance to disclose to him our plan. His absence is a mystery I don't spend much time on.

Nobody is out front of Delaney's at the bus stop when I get there. This is normal. There is no booze outside. While I am

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standing meditating on whether to go for a double Old Log Cabin for the hair, or a cool Busch for the throat, a tiny Japanese car slews into the curb and Pedro jumps out. The chickita drivin' is the Cuban skirt Pedro is chasing after.

"I am killing the two bushes with the same hand," he sez to me on the way into the bar. The best reply is to nod and smile, which is what I do.

The Moe is there ahead of us. The *Form,* now torn and tattered from constant viewing, lies before him. He has fished a butt from the ashtray and is in the straightening process when he spies us. "Closeup. Come have a drink. The bus don't come for fifteen minutes."

It is an offer I am obliged to accept. The standard disagreement over who is to buy is settled. Again I am stuck. The Moe pleads shortage of cash. Sez he is reluctant to go into his bankroll even for a pack of smokes. Pedro uses the language barrier. So we kill the six dollar pitcher before going out to the bus stop.

The bus is supposed to get there at eleven, but it don't. That the bus will be late goes without saying. It is a natural order of things. Serious thought is given to another round inside Delaney's, but post time is one P.M. Since Melvin is going in the first race, this idea goes nowhere. We are getting a bit anxious when finally we see the bus come sputtering down the street at twelve fifteen.

We pile on and get all the way to Twenty-seventh Avenue and about a Hundred-and-third before the Moe starts hacking and choking. I, my ownself, begin to cough. It don't take long to figure out the bus is filling up with diesel smoke. A fat woman in front of me pukes in her grocery bag. The bus struggles on another three blocks, then limps to the curb. Passengers plow out the doors, tears streaming down their collective faces.

We regroup at an Amoco gas station. A look at the station's clock, confirmed by Pedro's Bulova, puts the time at twelve thirty. It is not yet time to panic. We still have a half hour to go maybe five miles. I decide the best thing is to call a cab. Neither pay phone at the station works. The second one steals my only quarter.

Evidently, it is now time to panic because Pedro takes off running down the road. It's eight to five he has a stroke before he gets to the Palmetto Expressway overpass. The Moe rushes out into the midst of traffic, waving his *Form* in the air, screaming threats at passing motorists. He is ignored, so

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he runs down to the nearest stoplight for a captive audience. I get a buck's worth of change at the station and start trotting up the street looking for a phone.

A cab gets there at about twelve forty-five. We pick up the Moe, who is by this time frantically beating on rolled-up windows. I give the cabby a twenty to make the one o'clock post. I am sorry at once. He is driving already like he has no regard for my life, while the Moe is beating the back of his head with the rolled-up *Form*. I do not see Pedro along the roadside on this occasion.

We almost make it. At the Calder entrance, the driver tries to squeeze in front of a tourist from Michigan who takes the left front fender of the cab with him into the parking lot. Me and the Moe hit the grandstand turnstiles at a dead run.

Inside I stop for a program. "THEY ARE IN THE GATE," comes over the speakers. I am trying to get a glimpse at Filthy Melvin's number in the program. Moe, all the time, is pulling me in a gallop the sixty feet or so to the downstairs sellers.

"Number six," I yell. The Moe slaps three C-notes down in front of the seller. Then screams in the guy's face.

"Three hundred—number six—to win."

"THEY'RE OFF!" The speakers blare out. And the horrible bell rings, shuttin' down the parimutuels. It is a dirge knell.

The seller shoves back the three hundred. "Sorry, buddy."

"This is what happens when you try to live an upstandin' life," the Moe shouts to some passerby. On our rush out toward the grandstand, I see Pedro off to our right heading for the same exit. He is sweat-drenched, blowing like a plow horse that just did two miles over the hurdles at Ainstree.

"Espereme! Mira!" he yells at us, waving a ticket over his head. We only slow down a trifle on our way to the rail.

The field of sprinters is just coming into the three-eighths turn when we skid to a stop at the rail near mid-stretch.

"Give me that," the Moe sez, snatching the ticket from Pedro. He gives it the once-over. "You ignorant foreigner. This ticket is three hundred to win on the four. Who the hell is the four?"

I don't even have to look on the program.

The Moe wedges himself against the rail for a better look-see. "Here they come now," he reports.

The leaders are entering the stretch turn—the run for glory. I look hard but don't see Filthy Melvin anywhere up front. What I do see is Sweetiepie, number

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four, in the lead pulling steadily away from the pack.

"Where is Melvin?" the Moe asks, showing that great minds think alike. He don't no sooner get it out of his mouth than here comes Filthy Melvin, trailing the field by at least fifteen lengths.

"There he is," I feel obliged to tell him.

The Moe tosses his hands in the air, turning his back on the pitiful sight of Melvin strugglin' along. "It shoulda been obvious from the beginning," he yells in my ear over the roar of the crowd. "Melvin is doin' just what his imbecile is training him to do for the last three months—trail the field. Lombriz holds so many horses he forgets how to make one run. What could be better, an imbecile and a crooked moron."

I'm watching Sweetiepie open up nine lengths in the stretch. He wins it going away with his mouth open. All the time the Moe is crabbing about Big Bob and that little slimeball, Aron Lombriz. I don't think he understands this development.

"Mighty Moe," I say to him. "Sweetiepie wins it—with Pedro's bet, we got six hundred on him." He sputters in mid-tirade. I feel it convenient not to mention the extra two hundred I place with Vinnie under duress.

The Moe's head snaps to the toteboard like a dog hitting the end of his chain. Whereupon he calculates out loud, "Four to one—that's three grand." He gives a short yelp, pointing to the infield. "Look at the price on Melvin, three to two. Vinnie's fix is kept about as secret as the wreck of the *Hindenburg*. My sister in Nebraska probably sent her kid's lunch money in on him. What a bunch of suckers. Of course Sweetiepie wins it. What else, if you figure Big Bob for a nitwit. Only horse left in the race that you don't clock with a calendar."

Occurring then is a slight opinion difference between Pedro and the Moe. It's over who is gonna cash Pedro's ticket. They get no time to work it out. The inquiry sign lights up on the toteboard. Sweetiepie's number starts to blink. An objection from the jock of the second-place finisher follows quickly.

"They can't take him down!" I hear myself shout. "He wins by more than eight lengths —how can they take him down?" I am not really asking Moe. It is just what you would call a passing remark. The Moe answers all the same.

"Of course they will take him down. These stewards have the brains of a piss ant. What you

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think—they are goin' to be fair about something and give us a break?

Suddenly, after a bit, the numbers stop blinkin'. I grab hold of the Moe, somewhat emotional. "It's official—Sweetiepie wins it."

"Of course he wins it," the Moe replies. "What you think—they are goin' to pull down a horse that scores by nine lengths, laughing all the way?"

Pedro gets the ticket back. We single file up to the nearest cashier. Sweetiepie pays $10.20—Pedro collects fifteen hundred and thirty bananas, which we divvy up on the spot. After Pedro snatches back his original three hundred, it comes to four hundred and ten dollars apiece.

Pedro and the Moe decide to stay for the next race. The Moe has somethin' goin' in the fifth. I don't know why Pedro stays. Nobody knows why Pedro does anything. The final split of my end of the bet is set for Delaney's at six P.M. I am on my way out to grab a cab to pay Vinnie a visit when I spot Longshot Louie. He's planted on one of them resting benches near the grandstand entrance, elbows on knees, beating his forehead with the palms of his hands. I tap him on the shoulder.

"Longshot. What's with you?"

His head flips up. He jumps halfway off the bench and away before it sinks in who I am. "Closeup, damn—What the hell you doin'? I got a weak heart."

I can see he is ready to jump out of his skivvies. I lay the good news on him. "We bounced 'em for three grand on Sweetiepie."

"You're wastin' your breath talkin' to a dead man—make that dead and buried. I just dropped my last fifty on Filthy Melvin."

I am thinking fifty is no big deal. What is a big deal is where does Louie clamp onto any money? When I ask him, all he does is mumble. I ask again.

"I hocked Vinnie's watch is where I get it. When I am killed, don't tell my sister where I'm buried. So she can't dig up my body and sell it."

"It is a problem of small importance," I reassure him. I drop four twenties into his sweaty hand. "Go get it back out."

"I will not forget this, Closeup. You will get this back and then some."

I don't hold my breath. Louie is away and into the crowd before I make it out of the place.

Vinnie must take a stupendous bath on Melvin. When I go to collect, he looks to be approaching the state of basket-

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case. And he probably don't bother to lay off on Sweetiepie. Pattycake is strangely absent. A fact upon which I comment.

"The horses are killing me," he reports. "I sent him out on his last job. I got to let him go. With business what it is, I can't afford him no more."

A fortunate fringe benefit, I am thinking, as Vinnie demonstrates the true worth of his standing in the profession by not openly sobbing as he plunks the payoff into my outstretched hand.

A month later we are all broke, except Pedro. Pedro ends up marrying the chickita and bankrolling her daddy in the fresh fish business. They are making big bucks. Pedro comes by every week or so, drops off all the pompano and kingfish me and the old woman can use.

Louie dropped the eighty I loaned him on a cheap claimer in the fifth. The horse streaked to the front to win easily, but the jock was still standin' on the platform inside the starting gate.

The cops picked up Louie later that night breaking into a hock shop.

Big Bob Tucker went to the hospital on account it seems he was kicked in the kneecaps repeatedly by one of his cheap horses.

Sleeping in the unheated mission every night during Miami's cool winter nights caused the Moe's arthritis to act up so bad he moved in with his sister in Nebraska. Where, it is rumored, the nearest racetrack features stock cars and is a hundred miles to the east of the house of the Moe's sister. He will be back.

Pattycake is in business up in Broward County repossessing cars, and Vinnie is selling bolito tickets on the side to recoup.

Sweetiepie ran out of claiming horses to beat. So now he is trouncing allowance and stakes horses. If he keeps it up, he'll no doubt be voted Florida Horse of the Year.

Milo sold five bootleg movies to an undercover cop and is doing two to five at Raiford.

Herman the Horseshoer hit the pick-six at Hialeah a week ago Wednesday. He's now shoeing his own racehorse out the back of a new Ford van.

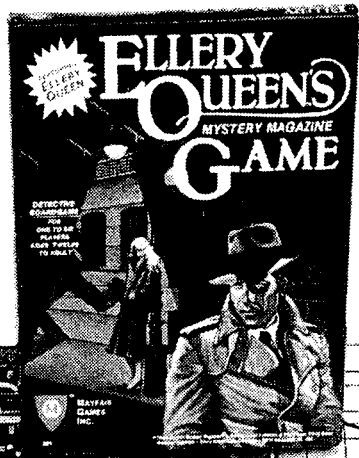
My old woman still has her garage, no car yet. But it's just a matter of time. She starts working two jobs Monday.

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FICTION

DOWNFALL

by Donald Olson



Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

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After paying young Pasky's bail, I waited in the anteroom while the jailer fetched the kid from the cellblock. When he appeared, he looked younger to me than he had in court: with his slim, athletic body and his attractive, freckled face rather like an appealing monkey's with its cocky, deep-set brown eyes, snub nose, and curly dark red hair, he was the sort of fresh-featured youngster more likely to be found in a high school locker room than a county jail.

I stuck out my hand as he would have walked past me toward the door that led to freedom: "Hi, Steven. My name's Somers. I'm the one who bailed you out."

His seemingly impudent glance met mine for a hesitant moment before he gripped my hand. "I remember you. You were in the courtroom."

"Come on, let's get out of here."

The rain had softened to a mere drizzle as we paused in the doorway. "My car's in the lot, but there's a diner just down the street. Shall we walk?"

"Hey, just who are you, mister? Some kind of social worker or something?"

I laughed. "Nothing like that. Just a friend."

"I've got no friends."

"You have now."

The diner was nearly empty. I chose a booth in the rear. The kid frowned over the menu. "Okay if I have a couple of burgers and some fries? Maybe a shake?"

"Whatever you want. Cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

I ordered coffee and a ham on rye, then waited until the kid was into his second burger before satisfying his curiosity. "Well now, Steven . . . "

"My *friends* call me Ginger." The irony somewhat disconcerted me, implying as it did a keener intelligence than I would have preferred.

"Okay, Ginger. First off, I know a little bit about you. That you're a drifter, that you're broke, that you were nabbed for vagrancy and petit larceny. A pair of socks, was it, in a dime store? I also know the judge is a real hard-nose and that when you appear before him you'll likely be fined a hundred bucks or given thirty days."

The boy's grin was engagingly innocent, naughty, schoolboyish. "If I'm still around," he quipped.

"I won't cry over losing my fifty bucks if you're not. But after you hear my proposition, I think you'll agree to stick around for a few days."

"Proposition?" Instant wariness, as I'd expected.

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"Nothing heavy, Ginger. First, a couple of ground rules. I'm not going to ask you any more about yourself than I already know. Neither are you to ask me anything about myself. Understood? Fine. It's very simple. I have a friend who's in a bind. He's not a crook, but for reasons of his own, he's got to disappear, and he needs a new identity. One of the things he needs is a valid Social Security card in his new name. He's older than I am so he can't just walk in and ask for one. They might wonder how come he's never had one at his age. That's where you come in. A kid getting his first job. You'd have no problem. I'll coach you on the vital statistics. When you get the card, you give it to me. That's all. Can you think of an easier way to earn a quick three hundred bucks?"

I waited, marshalling further inducements, while he finished the second burger and started on the shake. "Well?" I finally said.

"Well what?"

"Are you interested?"

"Sure, why not?" His tone implied my question was superfluous. "When do I get the money?"

"When I get the card. In the meantime I'll stake you to a motel room and grub."

"So what's the name I use?"

"Basil Trench. My friend already has a birth certificate, a valid one in that name. You can produce that if it's required. It'll be doctored to show your own birth date."

"So why not just pinch a card. Lift some dude's wallet."

"I told you, my friend's not a crook. And it must be valid."

All this was no more than a minor detail, although an essential one, of my plan, and I was taking no chances. The name I'd given the kid was not my real one, and I'd taken a bus from the city to the county seat, preferring him not to see my car or its license plate number. On our way back to the city Ginger slept most of the time. From the bus depot we took a cab out to the motel. The kid's look of surprise when he spotted the clothes and shaving gear on the bed rather tickled me.

"Wow, man, you must have taken a lot for granted."

"I spent a number of mornings in city court before picking you. I figured you were a good bet."

I had worked at the bank for the past fifteen years, ten of them as a teller, the past five, after the bank had diversified into brokerage services, in the securities department. It was a transfer, not a promotion. I knew I would get no further promotions, thanks

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to a fellow employee named Ray Jenkins, who had very effectively shafted me over a bit of awkwardness having to do with a customer's checking account. The error was not mine. Jenkins was the culprit. He knew it and I knew it, only he was a nephew of one of the top officers and as popular as I was not.

I had a reputation for being cold and standoffish, which I was. My fellow workers bored me and I made no secret of it.

Believe it or not, my plan started out as nothing more than a lark, an exercise in the imagination totally unconnected with my job at the bank. I had driven out one day to Grandview Cemetery to put some flowers on my wife's grave. Until Ruth had been killed by a hit-and-run driver during the second year of our marriage, I had been as sociable, as contented, as modestly ambitious as the next guy. But when she died, my vision of life changed. One day I was young, the next I was old. There was nothing I really cared about. I got up in the morning, I shaved, I dressed, I went to work, I drove home. That was it. Until that day when I was strolling back to my car and my eye chanced to fall on one of the gravestones, caught first by the rather unusual name, Basil Trench, and then by the birth and death dates. Trench was born the same year as I, but had died at the age of twelve.

Reading was my only diversion in those days, and as it happened, I had just finished a novel about a British spy who had borrowed the name of a child who had died in infancy from a gravestone in a village cemetery and had used it to secure documents for a false identity. Merely as a game, wanting to see if it could actually work, I looked up Basil Trench's obituary in a microfilmed copy of an old newspaper at the library. The Trench boy had died in a children's hospital in San Jose, California, and been buried in Grandview Cemetery. For three bucks I procured a certified copy of his birth certificate from the local Bureau of Vital Statistics.

I stuck the birth certificate away in a drawer and might have forgotten about it had it not been for that unpleasantness over the checking account error. Sequestered in the securities department downstairs in the bank, I found my imagination beginning to play a different sort of game. I had some practical knowledge of computer technology, my position gave me access to various kinds of data, and I found myself devising a scheme by which I

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could fraudulently manipulate certain securities transactions to the benefit of a nonexistent customer account.

As I proceeded to implement this scheme my motive was not a mercenary one, at least not in the beginning, but one perhaps even more ignoble: revenge. Revenge on Jenkins, whose smug, smarmy, false joviality was a constant reminder of the way he had so adroitly sabotaged my career. When my manipulations were exposed, as they eventually would be, my plan was so contrived that suspicion would be directed at Jenkins, as least as my accomplice.

As a young lad I had accompanied my father on many hunting and trapping expeditions into the woods of northern Oregon, although I never acquired his passion for such sports. On one of these trips he had shown me how to construct a trap that's called a downfall, known also as a deadfall, in which the animal is killed or imprisoned by a falling object when the trap is sprung. Whimsically, I adopted the term Operation Downfall for my scheme, in which Jenkins was to be the unwitting victim.

The motive of personal gain did not enter into my scheme until an event which, until it happened, I would have sworn to be as unlikely as my inviting Jenkins out for a friendly drink. I had flown down to Los Angeles for my week's vacation and in a bookstore on Wilshire Boulevard I chanced to meet a girl. Her name was Christy, and everything about her, her eager blue eyes, her slim, blonde beauty, the quiet warmth of her personality, all reminded me of Ruth.

Christy worked for a dress designer and dreamed of opening her own studio. Hardly expecting anything from our first meeting, I had been playing what I called the Basil Trench game, pretending that was my name and that I lived in Vancouver and was divorcing my wife and considering a move to California. She told me about a beach house for sale in Santa Monica and we drove past it, then walked by it along the beach. The moment I saw it and the effect of its charm on Christy, I made up my mind. I wanted Christy and I wanted that house and I knew the only way I could get them was through embezzlement, through my plan, Operation Downfall. After two more flying trips to L.A., I knew that Christy felt as strongly about me as I did about her.

At that point I set about acquiring the other documents I would need to verify my Basil Trench identity.

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I waited for Ginger in the little park across from City Hall. Presently, the kid came loping across the street, a smile beaming on his attractively mischievous monkey face. Something in his adolescent gawkiness briefly touched my heart. Had Ruth lived, who knows, we might have had a son about Ginger's age by now. My entire life would have followed a different track.

"Any trouble?"

"Nah. Piece of cake. I told her I was getting this job in a bowling alley."

"Will they mail the card?"

"I've already got it." He touched his shirt pocket, then dropped his hand, his face betraying sudden embarrassment. "Hey, are you in a big hurry, Mr. Somers?"

"Well, as a matter of fact . . . " I drew out my wallet and started removing the hundred-dollar bills. Ginger waved them away. "First would you do me a favor?"

I felt the barest nudge of alarm. I wanted to finish our business and get away from the kid as quickly as possible. He had done his part, I wished no further contact. And I was aware, too, from his lack of haste in grabbing the money, of certain misgivings I had been reluctant to acknowledge. This was the only detail of my plan requiring the use of another individual. It had worried me, but it was unavoidable. The thought now crossed my mind that Ginger might try to hold me up for a bigger bribe.

"What sort of favor?"

"Will you go bowling with me?"

This was hardly what I had expected. When he saw the look on my face, he leaned forward, the words tumbling from his lips. "I'm a nut about bowling. It's my favorite sport. That and tennis. There's a bowling alley in the next block, but I don't want to go in there by myself. It'd be more fun with someone else. . . . My dad and I used to go bowling all the time when I was a kid."

"Look, Ginger, I think it would be better—"

"Aw, come on, please. Will you?"

"I'm not a bowler."

"Then just watch me. I'm really pretty good. I don't know a soul in this burg . . . and then maybe we could have a beer together?"

"But I've got your money right here." Again I tried to press it on him, but he shook his head. "You keep it, Mr. Somers, till we're through bowling."

One can't deny, life being what it is nowadays, that common trust has become as rare

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among us as good manners, and even more sad, perhaps, is that deep division between generations which inspires anyone over a certain age to regard with suspicion any ingratiating friendliness on the part of teenagers. Thus I could not help searching for something devious behind that imploring smile on Ginger's face, yet there was something so irresistibly disarming in those pleading brown eyes that I found myself incapable of refusing.

Later, over our beer, I was obliged to listen to Ginger's story, a pretty depressing tale of foster homes, beatings, attempted runnings-away that had followed his mother's desertion and his father's subsequent death from emphysema when Ginger was barely thirteen.

I did my best to evade his own questions that followed until, smacking his forehead with one hand, he said: "Gee, I'm sorry. Honest. I know what you said about ground rules, but I haven't had anyone I could really talk to in months. You're the first person who's gone to bat for me. Heck, I know it wasn't because you liked me or felt sorry for me or any of that good samaritan garbage, but I was damn lucky you came along when you did. I guess I've sort of kidded myself maybe you did care a little. And I know you're a straight guy, Mr. Somers, or you wouldn't be doing all this for your friend. . . . I wish you'd tell me the story. You said he's not a crook and I'd know just from looking at you that you wouldn't put yourself out for someone who was bent. . . . You look something like my dad, you know that? He was a great guy, a real pal to me, but he was in jail once, too. We were really hard up. I mean hungry, man, and he couldn't find a job and he swiped a ham in a supermarket. Would you believe it, they tossed him in the can for *that?*"

"Ginger, you must have *some* family. Relatives? With that three hundred bucks, why don't you go home? Go back to school. You're a bright kid. Bumming around like this, that's a nowhere trip."

"Nah, I got no one. . . . You know, this ain't such a bad burg. A guy could make out okay here, maybe, if he had someone he could sort of lean on, you know. A real friend. I don't make friends easy with kids my own age. . . . I suppose you're married, right? And have kids of your own?"

"I was married, once. She died. I'm quite alone now."

He looked quickly down into his beer. "I don't suppose maybe we could be—oh, shucks, what

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am I flapping my tongue like this for. I'm a dreamer. My dad, though, he was a real great guy."

The fervor in the kid's voice left me with a hollow, uncomfortable feeling of guilt. I glanced at my watch and said, "Listen, it's been fun, but I've really got to shove off. Give me the card and take your money and buy yourself a bus ticket. Don't hang around here and wait for your case to come up. That judge is a coldhearted bastard, from all I've heard."

He shrugged his wide, thin shoulders and I felt another twinge of compunction as some of the lightness seemed to go out of him along with that gleam in his eye as he had spoken of his father and faraway things. "Yeah, sure," he said. "You're right. Time to hit the trail." He pulled the card and birth certificate (on which I hoped I could again alter the date) from his shirt pocket and handed it to me. As I gave him the money I felt a satisfying glow of relief. I wanted desperately to get away from the kid.

We parted outside the bowling alley. As I shook his hand and wished him good luck I was struck by something ludicrous in the air of shy, manly constraint that marked this final moment of parting. Who could possibly have guessed, observing us, the criminal nature of the transaction we'd just concluded?

Thereafter, the final stages of my plan moved swiftly. I acquired a driver's license and, to be on the safe side, a passport in the name of Basil Trench. At the end of that week I called in sick and flew down to L.A. I thought of the little trolley that ran along the beach between Santa Monica and Venice, the view of the ocean from atop Palisades Park, the glint of the surf rolling up on the sand below my dream house. And I thought of Christy. We had dinner at a restaurant in Venice, and her excitement at my news warmed my heart.

"You really mean it, Basil? I mean, so soon? You're actually going to move down here?"

"On one condition. That you marry me."

"The answer is an unqualified yes! But what about your job?"

"I've already given notice I'll soon be quitting." Which was true. "And you know our beach house? I called, and it's still on the market."

"But, darling, it would cost a mint."

"I'm not exactly a pauper, you know."

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Operation Downfall moved to its climax. I liquidated the securities for my nonexistent client and stashed the currency in my own safe deposit box. I was not so optimistic as to believe my plan for incriminating Jenkins would do more than cloud the air and put them off my scent until I was safely away. The auditors were not due in for another week, and by then I would have vanished. I would be Basil Trench, owner of a beach house in Santa Monica, California, a prospective groom, and a very rich man. Well, moderately rich, at any rate. On that weekend I flew down and bought the house. Christy and I shopped for furnishings and made plans to marry a month after I moved there.

I arrived home on the late flight that evening to find an unexpected shock in store for me. There on the front steps of my apartment house sat Ginger. His freckled, monkey face beamed up at me.

"Hi! Thought you'd never get here. I've been waiting for hours. See? I brought a six-pack."

My hand suddenly felt too weak to hold my overnight bag. "How did you find out where I live?"

"It wasn't easy, man."

"But I don't get it. I thought you'd be long gone. *Why?"*

He shrugged. "I don't know. I got to thinking. My case doesn't come up till next week so I figured, what the heck, why not hang around for a while. I spent all my time walking around, hoping I'd catch sight of you. I finally did. You were just getting in your car in the parking lot at the bank. I told some girl who came out I'd just missed you and had a package I was supposed to deliver. She told me where you lived. So here I am."

"Look, Ginger, this wasn't part of our deal. Ground rules, remember?"

"Hey, you're not really sore, are you? I just want us to be friends."

A noose tightening around my neck could not have instilled in me at that moment a stronger feeling of mortal danger. If he had spoken to an employee of the bank, it was more than likely he now knew my real name. Moreover, I distrusted the too studied air of nonchalance with which he had explained his reason for hanging around town. Why couldn't I have picked some brainless kid who didn't know the time of day?

"Ginger, you're a good kid, but I don't *want* any friends. You may as well know, I'm moving away. Leaving town. In fact I'm going to be busy tomorrow packing up."

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"Great. I'll help you."

"Thanks, but I don't need any help."

"Well, can't I just sack out here for the night?"

"There's no room. Come on, I'll drive you back to the motel."

"I checked out. I took a room in a crummy hotel on Market Place."

"Then I'll drive you *there*."

With a none too convincing air of indifference he seemed to accept defeat. "You are sore, aren't you?"

"Not sore, Ginger, just tired. I just got off a plane and I want to get to bed early."

"You took a holiday?"

"Business trip."

"Okay, I'm sorry if I've been a pest. You don't have to give me a lift. I'd rather walk."

I felt a stab of remorse as I watched him walk away with that loping stride of his, the six-pack still clutched in his hand. I wondered if I hadn't let panic overcome prudence. Would my unwelcoming attitude encourage dangerous speculations?

On Tuesday night I was in Santa Monica, installed in the beach house. I was Basil Trench, with a bank account that left me with nothing to worry about at least for five years, possibly longer. I felt there was a slim chance of my being tracked down once the auditors had discovered my fraudulent operations. And it amused me to imagine Jenkins' panic as he tried to squirm out of the inevitable accusations of complicity. In less than a month I would be married. I had a whole new life ahead of me.

I made a point of buying the Oregon papers; however, it was not until a week later that the story broke. When I turned the page and spotted the picture, I felt a sudden uprush of joy. I smiled—it was a good likeness of Jenkins—but when I read the story my smile turned into uproarious laughter, which, in the light of the tragic consequences, was hardly to my credit. Only it was so extraordinary, so incredible, so utterly unforeseen.

Ray Jenkins had committed suicide after leaving a note confessing to a string of embezzlements going back two years. Bank officers indicated that his highly sophisticated misappropriations might never have been exposed had he not engaged in certain easily detectable *securities manipulations*. Jenkins had evidently denied this aspect of the crime, though bank officers discounted his denial.

I sat there in a daze after dropping the paper. I suddenly realized that all my meticulous

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planning had been virtually unnecessary. I needn't have created the Basil Trench persona. I could have kept my own name. I could have kept my job if I wanted to. I need never have run the risk of recruiting Ginger!

All that time, Jenkins actually *was* a crook. Even that little slip-up for which I had taken the blame was probably no careless error at all.

Two days later I was sitting on the deck in my trunks, basking in the California sun and in my even more blissful sensation of freedom and safety. I sipped my wine and watched the ocean gradually darken below me. And then the door buzzer sounded. I smiled. Christy was early. I slipped on my beach robe and went to greet her.

"Hi, again! Guess who?"

He stood there, his face aglow, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

"What the *hell?* Ginger!"

"Guess maybe you never expected to see me again, right?"

I could only stare, the wine turning to acid in my stomach. He grinned even more broadly. "I hope you're not still sore."

"But what the devil are you doing here? How did you know?"

He winked naughtily. "You should have had better locks on your old apartment. I'm not a housebreaker, but I figured when I went to see you that day you were out of town and you wouldn't mind if I waited for you inside. When you didn't come, I got worried. I sort of snooped around and I found an airline ticket stub in your bureau and all that Basil Trench stuff and a letter from a real estate agent about this house. Don't get the wrong idea. I wasn't *looking* for anything like that. I was just curious, you know. About you. Well, anyway, I got to thinking you *would* be sore if you came home and found me there, so I decided I'd better wait outside." And then he giggled, his merry glance implying no sense of affront as he said, "Man, you really fooled me. I mean all that bull about your *friend* . . . hey, this bag's kind of heavy. Okay if I come in?"

I opened the door, too thunderstruck to offer any objection. He dropped his bag and gazed around wonderingly. "Hey, wow. Super pad. And gee, it's right on the ocean."

"Look, Ginger, I don't want to seem inhospitable but I am expecting someone. If you'd called first—"

"Maybe you better pretend you're not home. I could use a shower, and we've got a lot to talk about."

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While he was in the shower I called Christy and told her not to come over.

"Basil, are you all right? You sound funny."

"I'm fine. The thing is, honey, someone just dropped in unexpectedly. A friend from back home. It looks as if I might have to put him up for the night."

With a smile in her voice she said, "Someone you don't want me to meet? You're sure it is a *he?*"

"Yes, darling, it's a he. And no, you wouldn't want to meet him."

Presently, Ginger came out onto the sundeck with a towel wrapped around his hips. He stood looking out over the ocean, then perched on the rail and smiled across at me.

"This is really neat, man. I love it."

"Ginger, I know you must be wondering what it's all about—"

"Not really. I read the papers. All about that bank embezzlement where you worked. Was that dude who killed himself a friend of yours? Were you in it together?"

"No! My name wasn't mentioned, was it?"

"But why else would you have changed your name and got out just when you did? I thought of trying to talk to someone at the bank, but then I said to myself, no, that would be a dirty trick, considering all you did for me. I decided I'd come down here and talk to you . . . I mean before I talked to anyone else. If I do, that is. . . ."

It was my turn to acknowledge defeat.

"Okay, Ginger. There's no point in beating around the bush. How much do you want?"

"You mean money?" The indignation seemed genuine. "Forget anything like that, man. Gee, this is one terrific layout. We're going to be real happy living here together."

I jumped up. "Oh, no. Forget that idea, buddy. I'll give you whatever you want, but you can't stay here. I'm getting married in a couple of weeks."

Ginger regarded me with tolerant disapproval. "I don't think that's a very neat idea. I don't want a mom, thanks all the same. I'll settle for a father."

My temper flared. "You'll settle for what I give you!"

"Come on, man. You used me. You lied to me. Now it's my turn to make the proposition. If you don't go along with it, well, sorry, but I don't think *you'd* get off with just thirty days or a fine. . . . Cheer up, man. Think of all the fun we'll have together. And can I ask you just one more favor? Would it be okay by you if I call you Dad?"

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It's really very pleasant living here at the beach. I'm still haunted by the look on Christy's face, of course, when I told her the wedding was off and I couldn't see her again. There was no possible explanation I could offer, so I offered none, and that's what hurt her the most, I'm afraid.

I bought Ginger the convertible he admired, hoping it would keep him away from the house, only he refuses to drive down the coast for dinner unless I come along. I've put the house in both our names, at his suggestion, and the money is in a joint account. It's not that he cares especially about the house or the money. He cares only about me and will do anything to bind us more closely together. I can't say I enjoy those bowling sessions every Friday night, and I'm really too clumsy and shortwinded for tennis. Still, I do my best. And I'm getting used to jogging five miles up the beach every morning, although I'd rather relax with a book. I don't seem to find much time for reading any more, Ginger has too many other suggestions. He seems disinclined to make friends with any other young people, of either sex, and he continues to resist my advice that he finish high school and think about college. It's as if he wants me to be his whole life, as if he's trying to make up for all those years without parents.

It's not the sort of life I was hoping to lead, and at times I feel a truly depressing sense of loneliness—I think because he gives me so few opportunities to *be* alone. At times I feel as if I'm the one trapped under the downfall: a prisoner, which, let's face it, is what I am. I suppose there's no reason to believe the situation will ever change, unless Ginger tires of my company, which, alas, doesn't seem likely, or unless I decide to plunge into the ocean some day and keep swimming until I'm too exhausted to get back to shore. Believe me, I've thought about that.

Then at other times I think it could all be a lot worse. After all, Ginger's not a bad kid. I suppose, in many ways, you might even say he's the perfect son.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

Whatever he's up to, we think we'll stand back. We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 65.

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FICTION

The Stolen Grandfather

by Hayford Peirce



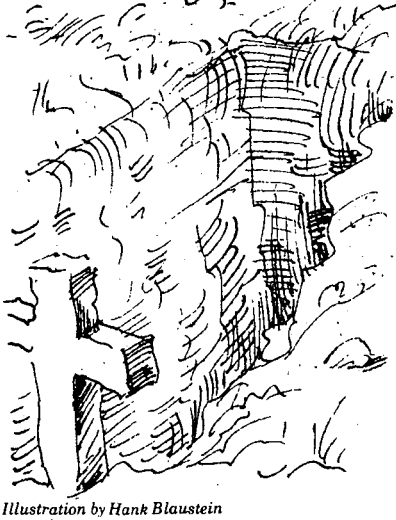


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Where else but Tahiti would you have trees growing out of the roof of your cathedral? I'd been staring at them now for three days and still hadn't figured out how they'd taken root or what they lived on. Admittedly, they weren't very big, maybe four or five feet, and in actual fact only two of them were growing out of the eaves under the red tile roof, while the other one was growing from a crack in the

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whitewashed walls, but still: a tree is a tree.

It was a pretty problem.

It was also the only problem I'd had to work on since I'd epoxied the sign to the outside of the building two flights below and sat down in my little office to wait for business. After the second day of no business I'd leaned back in my chair, put my feet up on the desk, and stared out the window. That was when I'd discovered the trees growing from the cathedral just across the noisy, traffic-jammed street here in the center of Papeete. By craning my neck I could see down into the dark cool offices of the priests at the back of the building. I wondered if they were aware of the encroaching timberline. Perhaps I should draw it to their attention. It couldn't be good for the structural integrity of the cathedral, even one with two-foot-thick stone walls that had withstood a century of tropical sun and thunderous downpours and occasional hurricanes.

It might be good word-of-mouth advertising. It would serve to demonstrate that Joe Caneili had the sharpest eye of any private eye in town.

I sighed, and wondered if it was time to go to lunch.

The door opened and a client stepped in.

"You're the detective?"

"I'm the detective."

Actually, the sign down below didn't say that at all. It said:

AGENCE CANEILI
INVESTIGATIONS, SÉCURITÉ
DISCRÉTION ASSURÉE

But what's an investigation without a detective? "Sit down," I said. He sat, looking nervous and unsure of himself. He was a thin little Tahitian of some forty-odd years, with thick black hair plastered down and combed straight back in neat furrows, a mouthful of moldy brown teeth, and except for that a pleasant enough face nearly black from the sun. He wore a longsleeved white shirt and a pair of dark blue trousers, pretty much the standard Tahitian uniform for attending church. Maybe he had me confused with the cathedral across the street.

"I've never met a detective before," he said apologetically.

"Neither have I," I said with perfect truth. Once I was about to meet a number of them in Cologne, Germany, after a trifling incident of no great importance, but I deferred that pleasure by catching a train south to Marseilles and joining the French Foreign Legion. The twenty-three years I'd spent in the Legion were as detective-

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free as I d hoped they might be.

The client and I were speaking French, not exactly the language of my childhood on a farm just outside Bookbinder, Kansas, but one that life in the Legion will teach you sooner or later. As a matter of fact, I thought I spoke it a little better than my friend the Tahitian, although both of us were proud citizens of the Republic of France, he by birthright here in French Polynesia, I by naturalization upon my retirement from the Legion. But a lot of older Tahitians still speak French as a barely grasped second language, particularly those from the outlying districts and islands.

"I don't understand," he said with an uncertain grin.

"Neither do I," I agreed readily. "Tell me what I can do for you."

He shuffled his feet and twisted his fingers. His eyes were engaged by a corner of my desk."It . . . it's . . . "he began.

"Very delicate," I encouraged.

"Yes. You . . . you see . . . someone has stolen my grandfather."

"Stolen your grandfather," I echoed. "You mean kidnapped?"

"No, *stolen.*"

After a while I got the story. It wasn't really what I'd expected when I'd set up a business with the idea of furnishing rent-a-cops and doing a little security work for the local banks and hotels. But then anyone who retires in Tahiti on a pension from the Foreign Legion and goes into the private peeping business probably deserves any surprises he gets.

My first client was named Tamuela Tehotua. Tamuela is Tahitian for Samuel. He owned a good portion of a narrow valley about twenty miles from town in the district of Tiarei on the north side of the island. The land had come down to him through many generations of Tehotuas. On it he grew bananas, manioc, taro, and a host of the other peculiar-looking Tahitian vegetables I saw Tahitians carrying home with them from the big wrought-iron marketplace in the middle of town. In the evenings Tamuela would drive the half mile down his valley to the lagoon and paddle his pirogue out to go fishing by the light of a pressure-lantern. His wife raised chickens and anthuriums for sale, and the two oldest sons living with them went off every day to mend the single road that winds its way around the island. Besides all this, he was a deacon in the local church. It seemed like a placid enough existence.

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His troubles had begun about six months before. His wife developed a bleeding ulcer and had an operation. His married daughter suffered a miscarriage. His youngest son, a schoolboy, broke his leg in three places. The eldest son was in an automobile accident and badly scarred. His favorite dog was gored by a wild pig. His horse fell dead at his feet for no apparent reason. A freak whirlwind lifted the roof from his house and deposited it on top of his wife's anthurium shelter.

After that things got worse. After a while I held up my hand. "I can't believe it," I said in commiseration. "That's . . . that's *terrible!*" I stared at him in wonderment. Job wasn't in the same league as Tamuela when it came to afflictions. He nodded somberly, with a certain battle-scarred pride. "But I'm not very sure there's anything I can do. . . . "

But that wasn't why he'd come to see me. Eventually, he told me, he'd located the source of his problems. The minister of the church in which he was a deacon had provided a lot of Christian solace but very little in the way of practical help. Despairing, Tamuela had furtively gone to consult the old Mama Pito, the local *tahua*, or sorcerer.

"Ahh," I said.

That showed sound thinking.

Mama Pito had listened to his litany of woes, cast a few rapid spells or whatever Tahitian witches do, and come to a clearcut diagnosis.

Tamuela's dead grandfather was the source of the problems.

"He was a bad man," explained Tamuela. "He never went to church. He beat my grandmother. He had many other women. When we were little, he used to shout at us and beat us. He drank, and was drunk all day Saturday and Sunday." He leaned forward to whisper. "He used to sign the Blue Cross, and then drink anyway!"

"The rascal," I muttered, shaking my head. Signing the Blue Cross as a pledge to give up drinking for a specified period of time was serious business in Tahiti. Tamuela's grandfather must have been a rare old reprobate.

"But now you say he's stolen," I prompted, curious as to what would emerge next. As I understood it, however much of a roisterer he might have been in his time, Grandpa was dead and buried these twenty years now.

Tamuela looked distinctly embarrassed. "Well," he said reluctantly, "it's like this . . . "

Mama Pito, the sorcerer, had given Tamuela a cure along

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with her diagnosis. It was cheap, practical, and struck to the heart of the matter. Tamuela was to dig up his grandfather's remains and stir the bones around, breaking up any of the larger ones and in particular transfixing the skull with the iron digging bar. Once Grandpa had felt the wrath of his grandson and learned he was no longer impervious to attack, he would leave Tamuela and his beleaguered family strictly alone.

"I see." I took a deep breath. I'd heard of similar antics when I'd been stationed with the Legion in Africa, but here in Tahiti it had caught me a little off guard. This was a rich, modern, westernized little island now. No one wore grass skirts or Mother Hubbards any longer, and the friendly natives danced mostly in discos, drove BMWs to their air-conditioned offices, and dined on air-freighted filet mignon instead of missionary stew.

Or at least the rich and educated ones did, I corrected myself. There were still plenty of the others, the poor, uneducated, gap-toothed ones, many of whom had left the traditional ways of the islands to come to Tahiti, the land of dreams, where everybody had a television set and there was a bar on every corner. They were the ones who sold the fruit at the marketplace, or collected the garbage cans of their more fortunate brethren, or sometimes just sat empty-eyed at the side of the road.

You've forgotten that you live among them, now that you've got yourself a little office with a rackety air conditioner?

"I see," I repeated. "So then what did you do?"

Tamuela was like most of us: he didn't relish digging up an ancestral grave in the dark of the night and giving his grandfather, even if he was a wicked grandfather, a bash on his bony skull. So he subcontracted the job.

"I asked my neighbor, Marama, to do it for me."

"Mmmm. Must be a pretty good neighbor."

"Oh no, he's a very bad man, that's why I asked him to do it. No one else I know would do a thing like that."

"Even to help a neighbor." I sighed. "It's a hard world."

Tamuela frowned at my levity. "I told you: Marama is a bad man. He made me pay him ten thousand francs to . . . deal with my grandfather."

Ten thousand francs. That was about five hundred and fifty French francs, or about sixty-five U.S. dollars. It sounded like a reasonable enough fee to me for a little graverobbing. I wondered if

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they'd picked a night with thunder and lightning. . . .

"Okay," I said. "You found Marama, a bad guy, to do the job, and you paid him. What then?"

"He did it." Grandpa, it seems, was buried conveniently to hand a couple of hundred yards up the valley from Tamuela's house in a small family plot that had served the Tehotuas for generations. His wife and family were gone for the day. Marama rattled his way up the valley in his old Land Rover, unloaded his tools, and got to work. After the first spadeful of dirt, Tamuela felt queasy and left him to do it. Some time later, Marama's Land Rover passed him, going fast. What appeared to be the end of a disintegrating coffin stuck out the back. Tamuela moved cautiously up to the cemetery to investigate. Sure enough: Grandpa had been stolen.

"I don't understand," I said. "Why would he steal him?"

Tamuela looked at me as if I had just dropped several notches in his estimation. Maybe as a detective I was expected to know. "He's my enemy."

"Oh." I mulled that over for a while. It made sense, but raised another question. "If he's your enemy, why did you hire him?"

Tamuela blinked his big brown innocent eyes at me. "I didn't think he was *that* bad an enemy."

I didn't bother to lock my office behind me. I walked down to the street and the terrible furnace of noontime heat and stood blinking at the trees growing from the walls of the cathedral. Maybe someone sneaked by and sprayed liquid fertilizer on them at night, I decided. Militant atheists bent on the destruction of the temple to superstition would be my best bet. I dabbed the sweat that was already beading my forehead and made my way into the streams of neatly uniformed Catholic schoolgirls pouring down the sidewalk.

The lunchtime traffic had gridlocked at the intersection in front of the cathedral, so I skipped deftly through it and walked the short block down to the waterfront. This was a four-lane road that ran along the U-shaped harbor of Papeete. Cool-looking shade trees were planted down the middle, arching over on either side. There were shops and travel agencies and restaurants on one side, a parking lot and the oily water of the harbor on the other.

I could feel my brains sizzling in the heat as I walked across the unshaded asphalt pavement of the parking lot down to

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where half a dozen small fishing boats were tied up. Across the harbor a big black Russian cruise ship was docked in front of the long low customs sheds, and a grey destroyer of the French navy was cleaving through the harbor waters on its way to the pass and the open ocean. Hung across the horizon behind all this activity was the jagged silhouette of distant Moorea, looking like Hollywood's notion of what a tropical island backdrop should be.

Marama owned a fishing boat, Tamuela had told me, the *Tamara Deux*, since his primary profession was fisherman rather than hardened graverobber. Sometimes he kept his boat moored in the placid waters of the lagoon at Tiarei, a mile away from where Tamuela lived, and sometimes he kept it here in town. If he had made a good catch, he'd bring it in to town and the central market.

I walked by the half-dozen boats. They looked like Maine lobster boats to me, and were used to chase tuna, mahi-mahi, bonito, and a multitude of other fish unfamiliar to me. The last one I came to was the *Tamara Deux*. My luck was in.

Don't bother to ask what kind.

The owner of the boat was also in, swabbing it down with a hose. He was about the size of your average bull walrus, including the belly, and was the same sleek mahogany color. His muscles were nearly concealed by the fat, but not entirely. His short black hair was cropped close to his skull, and as a fellow named Bill Veeck once said about another fellow named Walter O'Malley, he had a face that even Dale Carnegie would want to punch. Except for his color and the fact that he wore nothing but a ragged bathing suit nearly hidden by his tremendous gut, he reminded me of a German sergeant major I'd once served under for a spell in Corsica. The sergeant major was found dead one morning in the middle of the parade ground with a cord nearly lost in the folds of his neck. It was eventually blamed on Corsican terrorists. Very mysterious.

I sighed, and asked myself if I really wanted to be a detective. Confronted with the Maramas of the world I thought wistfully of the good old days in the Legion. Particularly of the moments I was cradling a heavy machine gun in my arms. "Well, well, appearances can be deceiving," I told myself briskly, "maybe he's really a very pleasant fellow."

I cleared my throat and said hello.

Marama scowled up at me.

I smiled and jumped down

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into the boat beside him. He turned the hose to water down my feet. I was barefooted except for plastic sandals and the water was cool and refreshing, so if you thought about it you might say it was a little gesture of friendship. I kept the smile on my face.

"You're Mr. Marama?" I asked, even though Marama was his first name. It never hurts to be polite.

He nodded.

I made an easy gesture with my hand. "My friend Tamuela asked me to come by, say hello, maybe chat a moment. . . ." My smile faded away as I watched his sullen face clamp up like a beartrap snapping shut. He tossed the end of the hose over the side and stepped back warily, as if measuring how much room he'd need to tear my limbs off. His steam-shovel hands dangled on each side of his belly the way the rasslers hold them on television. I edged away as nonchalantly as I could, to lean a hip against the farthest gunwale.

"Look," I said, "let's be reasonable. All Tamuela wants is his grandfather back. He'll do his own bashing and burial. He doesn't want to make trouble for you. He doesn't want to go to the police, lay a complaint, cause a big fuss for you, have them . . ."

I trailed off because Marama was sneering scornfully. He knew as well as I did that the police were the last people on earth Tamuela wanted to see. Well, it had been worth a try.

"Okay," I said, trying a variation on the theme, "*he* won't go to the police, if *you* won't go to his pastor and tell him . . . all about this. Or tell his wife." Mrs. Tamuela was a church-going lady of even greater piety than her deacon husband. What she and the pastor would have to say to Tamuela about consorting with sorcerers and digging up ancestral bones didn't bear thinking about—at least by Tamuela. He was, in fact, so stricken by the prospect that he'd eventually turned up at Agence Caneili. Whatever my fee might be, he figured, it was bound to be less painful than the alternatives that were about to swallow him up.

Marama was openly contemptuous. He knew I had no hand at all to play, but I made one last attempt. "Look, guy, I'll admit that personally I think Tamuela made a mistake when he hired you. I told him so. A job like that is worth a lot more than ten thousand francs, even for a big strong fellow like you. I mean, if it was me, I'd have said, 'Marama, look, here's twenty-five thousand francs to do this for me,' and when you

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were all finished and I saw what a good job you'd done, maybe I'd have said, 'Gee, I really appreciate that, here's another ten thousand just to thank you.' " I beamed at him hopefully. Tamuela had authorized me to go as high as a hundred thousand francs, a fair month's pay in Tahiti, where there's no income tax to whittle it down.

It had seemed like a lot of money to me just to get a grouchy old grandfather back until Tamuela told what the alternative was: his flashy white BMW coupé, hardly more than a year old.

Look, don't ask *me* what a middle-aged dirt-farmer and church deacon wants with a 130-mph sports car on an island with one road around it and maybe two miles of freeway where you could unwind it. I'm definitely the wrong guy to ask: I'm perfectly happy chugging around in my nine-year-old Deux Chevaux, that curious French car that looks like it's been put together in someone's back yard from a pile of leftover corrugated tin. But then I seem to be the only person in the poverty-stricken Tahitian quarter where I live who doesn't have, or yearn for, a video cassette recorder to go with his color TV. On reflection, though, I knew very well why Tamuela had a BMW: only because he couldn't afford a Mercedes.

But his enemy Marama, it seemed, couldn't afford either of them. So here was his opportunity to do a little horsetrading: the return of Tamuela's grandfather, and a stony silence, for Tamuela's shiny white motorcar.

"He'll wreck it, I just know," Tamuela had moaned piteously. "And I've still got another two years of payments at the bank."

"Why don't you sign it over to him and let *him* make the payments?" I suggested.

"He's already thought of that. He just wants me to *lend* my car to him."

"So if he crashes it, you're still responsible."

Tamuela nodded miserably.

"Look, I'm sure your wife is more understanding than you think. Suppose—"

"No, no, *no!*" he cried, throwing up his hands. "My wife must never, never, *never* learn, nor the pastor nor the . . . "

The litany of people who must never learn of his little foray into practical sorcery ran through my mind as I stood uneasily on the stern of Marama's fishing boat, staring at his dullard's features and wondering what to do next. But perhaps my offer of thirty-five thousand francs for his silence

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was getting through to him after all: what passed for his face was pensive now, and I could almost see rusty cogs and gears turning over ponderously inside his skull. After a while he squinted at me narrowly.

"Tamuela," he said in a voice that seemed to issue from dark, watery caverns. "He'll pay me instead of giving me the car?"

I nodded reluctantly. Everybody hates a blackmailer, especially when you see that he's going to get away with it. "That's right, thirty-five thousand francs."

The gears ground some more. "Good." He thrust out his hand. "I'll buy my own car. Give me two million."

"Two *million?* Hey, wait a minute! We were talking about thirty-five thousand, not—"

He glowered. "Two million. Cash." His hand moved up and down impatiently.

"Look," I said, "maybe fifty, but that's—"

His mouth tightened petulantly, he slid forward as gracefully as a walrus slipping off an ice floe, and before I had my arm more than half raised, he smashed me on the side of the head with a fist of iron. Lights twinkled and sparkled all around me, there was a strange metallic taste in the back of my mouth, and my knees seemed to be wobbling peculiarly. In fact I seemed to be sliding down to the wet deck.

But before I got that far, he reached down to pin me under the armpits, hoisted me effortlessly off my feet, and slung me over the gunwale into the cool, refreshing waters of Papeete harbor.

Well, now.

I ask you.

What's a fellow to do next?

I don't know what *you'd* do next, go home and whistle up a regiment of Royal Gurkhas most likely, but what *I* did, after a change of clothes and a brief catnap that left my head feeling worse than ever, was to pile into my dilapidated Deux Chevaux and pedal it out into the Tahitian countryside to pay a visit to my client, Tamuela Tehotua.

Once in the district of Tiarei, with the lagoon to one side of the narrow road and mountains and cliffs to the other, it took an hour of questions and driving back and forth before I was able to locate the inconspicuous dirt road that disappeared into the bush and up a narrow valley choked with trees and vegetation. Eventually it widened a bit, and there was Tamuela's family farm. The living quarters were three or four small separate buildings, all of them hammered together from fiber-

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board and corrugated tin, and painted a gay blue. Chickens scratched in the dirt, roosters strutted and flapped their wings, half a dozen dogs barked viciously or slept peaceably in the shade, according to their whim. Somewhere a radio blared disco music at full volume. It was all very Tahitian.

Tamuela was in a rickety structure out back wearing nothing but a yellow bathing suit and lovingly waxing his already glistening BMW. Even I had to admit that it was a fine looking car and that it would be a darn shame to let it be sullied by the likes of a scoundrel like Marama. Just as I was shaking hands with Tamuela for the third or fourth time that day—Tahitians have seized the habit from the French and joyfully enlarged upon it—I saw a barrel-like Tahitian woman bearing down on us in a curious wobbling motion from a screened-in enclosure full of plastic-looking anthuriums. What must have been a hundred yards of gaudy red *pareo* cloth were wrapped around her gargantuan belly and tucked between her enormous breasts, and her legs were so encased in fat that you wondered how she walked. Her black hair was piled up in a bun above a moon-like face that swallowed up her features. It was hard to locate her elbows in the thickness of her arms. I smiled politely. I could understand now why Tamuela preferred to remain on the better side of his little lady: she could have crushed the walrus-like Marama into bonemeal and used him to fertilize her plants.

Tamuela shied back at her approach. "Ah. My wife. Mr. Caneili, my wife, Madame Tehotua. *Chèrie,* I present Mr. Caneili." He turned a desperate eye in my direction. "He . . . he's a member of a Mormon delegation visiting from Utah. He's . . . he's interested in genealogical research. He thought it would be interesting to visit our little cemetery."

That was a little stiff, I thought, trying to pass off a battered old Legionnaire as a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Mormon dignitary. I wasn't even wearing a longsleeved white shirt and black tie like all young Mormon missionaries I saw bicycling around town.

Mrs. Tehotua, however, seemed to entertain no doubts. She sniffed disdainfully, nodded curtly, and waddled back to her flowers. I raised an eyebrow. Either she didn't hold with Mormons or she had little truck with the social graces.

"Quick thinking," I said to Tamuela as we made our way up the valley by foot, trailed by

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three or four dogs of mixed descent. "What's this about geneo . . . genea—"

He smiled nervously. "Mormons are very interested in their ancestors and genealogy in general. They go all over the world drawing up family trees, even for people who aren't related to them or who weren't Mormons. Then they baptize them and even though they're dead they become Mormons." He frowned. "It's a very peculiar doctrine. Or at least my wife thinks so."

"I noticed that." We pushed through some final bushes and came out in a neatly tended clearing between the green valley walls. A few enormous old shade trees, chestnuts and mahogany, grew overhead, and beneath them in a lush green lawn were twenty or thirty carefully arranged grave markers, some of stone, some of wood. Half a dozen graves were concrete slabs, freshly whitewashed, with varying degrees of ornamentation slapped over them. The rest were just lawn.

Except one. Off to one side of the clearing and nearly hidden from sight by the lavender glory of an enormous bougainvillea was a gaping hole with piles of dirt heaped around it. Marama had not been a tidy worker. I walked around the thorns of the bougainvillea to peer down into the depths of the cool dark earth. Then I turned around to look back the way we'd come. The farm was completely out of sight, around two or three bends in the valley. But even so . . . "You're not worried your wife might wonder why there's an open grave in—"

"No," he said with absolute certainty. "She never comes up here: she's afraid of the ghosts."

I raised an eyebrow at this unlikely news, but limited myself to gesturing at the carefully tended little graveyard. "I suppose your children take care—"

"Oh no," interrupted Tamuela scornfully. "*She's* afraid to come up here, *they're* too lazy." His skinny brown chest expanded with pride. "*I* take care of my ancestors."

I fingered the bruise on the side of my head where Marama had bashed me. It felt as soft and pulpy as an old mango. "Hrmph," I muttered. "You mean *no* one ever comes up here but you?"

"Well . . . maybe once in a while, on their way up the valley to go hunting."

I stepped back to the path we had followed from Tamuela's house. The heaps of dirt and the open grave were camouflaged by the great sprays of bougainvillea. An idea began to stir dimly. "You say your troubles

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began about six months ago," I said slowly, feeling my way along tentatively. "I wonder now. I wonder . . . is it possible that this grave of yours was actually dug up, say, six months ago and *nobody's noticed until now?"*

Tamuela stared at me as if I was suddenly speaking in tongues. "But I *told* you! It was last Wednes—"

I silenced him with a curt gesture. "Yes, yes, but who *else* knows that?" I hissed irritably.

"Ma . . . Marama?" he offered feebly.

"Who's your *enemy!* I suppose that your—" I drew my face painfully into the semblance of a smile "—charming wife knows this Marama character?"

"Oh yes."

"And *knows* that he's your enemy?"

"Of course. In fact, it all started when he called her—"

I grimaced. "Please. No need, I can well imagine." I strode back to Grandpa's open grave and stood staring at it, tapping my chin with a fingernail. "Just suppose, Tamuela," I said, "just suppose that all these piles of dirt had grass growing on them, and maybe a scattering of dead leaves. . . ." I perched on the edge to look down into the gaping hole. "And suppose there were some nice weeds growing down there on the bottom. What would you say to *that,* Tamuela?"

The frail little Tahitian goggled. "Say? Why . . . why . . . I'd say . . . say that—"

"—this grave has been dug up for *at least* six months," I intoned ponderously. "Or even longer." I gazed at Madame Tamuela with the easy assurance that comes from being a Mormon authority on genealogy, and presumably on graves, meeting her beady black eyes unwaveringly. "Look at those weeds, look at the depth of those dead leaves. . . . "

In fact, that's just what Tamuela's helpmeet was doing, but more in wonderment than in suspicion if I was correctly reading the interplay of emotion in the rolls of fat that made up her face. Her gaze shifted balefully to Tamuela, who stood hopping nervously from one foot to the other, his face the picture of rampant guilt.

"Tamuela!" she shouted in a voice that set my ears ringing, and it was pitiful to see him flinch. "For six months now you've been coming up here and never . . . never *noticed* this outrage?" Her eyes were popping with apoplexy. *"That's* the way you tend to our ancestors?" She raised an enormous arm and ponderously, menacingly, stepped forward. "You leave it

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for someone like this . . . *Mormon* to . . ." Speech failed her, and she lifted a mighty fist above her shoulder. Tamuela stood rooted, staring at it helplessly, like a rabbit confronted by a snake.

I stepped smoothly between them. Her enormous belly prodded against me with the irresistible force of an atomic icebreaker. I held my breath and stood my ground—with what I hoped was a somber but dignified expression on my face—and slowly, reluctantly, the pressure abated. "This is all very interesting," I said gravely to Madame Tehotua, as if unaware that I had just averted a clear case of manslaughter-one. She glared angrily, deprived of her legitimate prey, her fists the size of smoked hams. I pulled thoughtfully at my lower lip. "There must be a *reason* why someone would want to dig up an old grave like this. Now, I know that none of the three of *us* are superstitious Africans, or anything like *that,* but I wonder . . . I just wonder: has any sort of misfortune or bad luck happened to either of you in the last six months or so . . . ?"

Two hours later I finished my third glass of freshly made limeade and pursed my lips as I stared pensively into the lengthening black shadows that were creeping up the valley from the direction of the ocean. From the mountains high in the interior a cool wind was blowing down the other end of the valley, past Grandpa's grave and around our three canvas chairs on the tramped-dirt courtyard of the Tehotua homestead. I shivered slightly, and spoke as if musing to myself.

"It sounds to me as if they definitely have an enemy, somebody who deliberately stole those remains just so he could use them to make trouble for Mr. and Mrs. Tehotua. But how to find out who that enemy is? No use going to the police, of course. . . . I wonder . . ." I turned slowly to Mrs. Tamuela, who sat hunkered in the shadows like a watchful grampus. Her great moon face was a mask of sullen neutrality. We'd never be chums, but at least I'd been a fresh ear to whom she could impart her lengthy tale of woe.

"I wonder," I repeated, "if there's any truth in what I hear about these Tahitian sorcerers, what do they call 'em, *tahuas?*" I saw Tamuela and his good lady exchange a thoughtful look, and frowned dubiously. "Just nonsense, I suppose. But . . . in a case like this . . . one of these *tahuas* . . . probably some very

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simple explanation to how they divine things, probably they just hear all the gossip, get to know what everybody's up to. . . . Well, maybe, if you *asked* . . ."

Tamuela cleared his throat nervously. "Mama Pito." It came out a tiny squeak. He looked at us in surprise, as if startled to hear his own words, and ran his tongue along his lips. "Mama Pito," he repeated, somewhat more confidently. "They . . . they *say*—"

"Tamuela!" Madame Tehotua's piggy eyes had almost disappeared into the rolls of fat, so intense was her scowl. "What do *you* know of this . . . this Mama Pito?" demanded the pillar of the church.

"Oh, nothing, my dear, nothing at all. It's just that Mr. Caneili suggested—"

"—that perhaps it might be useful, certainly there'd be nothing to *lose,* if one of you, just out of curiosity, went to—"

"Never!" said Madame Tamuela in tones that reminded me of twenty years of sergeant majors on parade grounds all over the world. "Tamuela, do you hear me? I absolutely forbid it. If the pastor ever heard—"

"Exactly!" I interrupted. "What if the pastor learned about it?" I pulled a long face, then turned my earnest gaze from one to the other. "But surely the pastor would have no objection if a foreigner, a . . . a *Mormon!,* asked this witch woman a few simple questions?"

I spread my hands wide. "Did I hear you say her name was—Mama Pito?"

If any of you ever read the Sherlock Holmes stories, as I did as a kid back in Bookbinder, Kansas, you may recall that even the world's greatest consulting detective suffered the occasional setback and even outright failure. So you probably won't be altogether devastated to learn the outcome of Caneili's First Case was not exactly what I'd so confidently foreseen.

Not that Madame Tamuela didn't take the initiative into her own hands, just as I'd been counting on. Where I went wrong was in underestimating just how *much* initiative she'd take.

I'd set my plan—or what passed for one—into motion by calling back at the Tamuela south forty around noon the following day, plenty of time for me to have worked out the details of my spurious interview with old Mama Pito, Tahitian soothsayer supreme.

By the time I'd revealed the name "Marama" as being the culprit conjured up by Mama

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Pito responsible for the desecration of the family graveyard, Madame Tehotua was seething, and Tamuela was looking increasingly itchy. Seeing her clenched lips and heaving bosom I should have been nervous, too; instead, it was all that Caneili the Dope could do to keep from rubbing his hands together like those frockcoated villains in the cartoons and cackling "heh heh heh" at his own cleverness.

As I made my way back to town in my rattletrap Deux Chevaux, working the gearshift in and out of its demented position on the dashboard, I chuckled smugly to myself from time to time. If all worked out—as my profound insight into the workings of the human psyche told me it would—Tamuela's problems were just about resolved, and the only remaining question was how I'd spend the fee he would graciously tender me.

Madame Tamuela, I knew, so used to total dominance in her dealings with the weaker sex, would certainly head for a confrontation with the nogoodnik responsible for the attacks on herself and her loved ones.

Marama would deny the charges with his usual suavity.

The pitch of Madame Tamuela's voice would rise another octave and dogs would begin to howl in the next district. Cuffing Marama playfully against the ear to send him reeling to the ground, she would order the restitution of Grandfather's bones.

From where he groveled miserably in the dirt Marama would blurt out that it was Tamuela, her very husband, who was responsible for the theft. Lashed to a fury by such a self-serving lie, Madame Tehotua would—I sincerely hoped—sink the point of her meaty foot several times deep into Marama's rib cage.

My chuckle became an outright laugh as I ran this pleasing image through my mind a second, and even a third, time, and I was barely alert enough to get my jalopy out of the way of a glinting white object that had rocketed up behind me and flashed past, leaving me rocking in its wake. An instant later I could see its rear wheels fighting for traction on a tight corner a hundred yards ahead of me, and then it was gone.

"Snap out of it, Joseph my boy," I said to myself sharply, "or you'll get yourself killed while you're daydreaming over the beautiful Madame Tamuela. Why, you even thought that looked like her going by in charge of that runaway missile!" Shaking my head at my own foolishness, I double-clutched vigorously down into third gear and raised my rate

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of knots marginally. It was time to get to town to treat myself to a grade-A, bang-up lunch to celebrate the triumphant conclusion to Caneili's First Case.

I had in mind a sidewalk café that catered mostly to French sailors and served passable steak and french fries. There I could sit in the deep shade and cast looks of triumphant gloating from time to time at Marama's fishing boat tied up just across the way, if this should happen to be his day in town. "Marama," I would say, saluting him with a glass of red wine, "Marama, your retribution is on the way."

Truer words, as my old granny used to say, were never spoken.

The noontime traffic on its way home to lunch had subsided by the time I reached town and the parking area that skirted the waterfront. Off to my right, at about the spot where Marama had so briskly dumped me into the harbor, I could see a crowd gathered by the water's edge. What appeared to be a yellow crane loomed out of the mixed group of Tahitians and Europeans. A good detective is, above all else, curious, so I parked the Deux Chevaux and strolled through the midday heat to join the crowd of happy rubbernecks.

What I saw in the next thirty seconds was enough to dispel all thoughts of lunch, grade-A, bang-up, or otherwise.

The center of attraction was a large diesel hoist with the name of a stevedoring company stenciled on its side. Blue fumes poured from its exhaust, while a large brown Tahitian wearing a straw hat sat patiently at the controls, a cigarette dangling from his lips. A dozen or so Tahitians, including four blue-clad harbor police, milled around in front of the hoist, getting in each other's way as they tried to attach the thick metal hawser that dangled from the L-shaped derrick to something beyond my vision just at the edge of the water.

I slipped around the crowd to the harbor's edge and cast an eye on the spot where Marama's pride and joy, the *Tamara Deux*, had been tied up a few days before. An icy hand clamped itself around my stomach.

Instead of a small fishing boat rocking placidly on the harbor waters, the tinted windows and shiny white top of what appeared to be a two-door sports coupé loomed out of the oily waters. I didn't have to be told that what I saw was *not* the latest sea-going model of BMW's amphibious division. . . .

Behind the window of the

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driver's door I could make out the enormous bulk of Madame Tamuela, a dark blue print dress stretched to the bursting point across her meaty shoulders, a small black hat perched absurdly on the bun of hair on top of her head. I wondered inanely how she'd ever gotten into the car and behind the steering wheel. Her hands were clasped together against the wheel and her lips seemed to be moving in fervent prayer. At least I *hoped* that for such a devout lady it was prayer.

Common sense was telling me that a tactical withdrawal was the order of the day, but a morbid fascination drew me forward. How and why was Tamuela's beautiful white car floating so serenely on the water? I asked myself. I knew that Germans turned out well-engineered cars, but ones that would *float?* And I knew from recent experience that the water there was more than just a couple of feet deep, so it couldn't be resting on the bottom.

I shoved my way into the crowd to gain a closer look, and the horrid truth was suddenly revealed to me.

Madame Tamuela, snug in her husband's cherished car, rested on top of whatever remained of Marama's fishing boat, now wedged to the bottom of Papeete harbor.

I began to edge my way back out of the crowd.

But not before I'd caught a glimpse of a large, nearly naked Tahitian covered with half-dried blood grappling furiously with the longshoremen who had finally succeeded in attaching the hawser to the submerged bumper of the white BMW. From the tenor of the shouts and roars, the crop-haired hulk in the torn bathing suit was being forcibly restrained from removing the car from the roof of his boat by an even more direct method: simply pushing it—and its obese occupant—off the boat and onto the harbor bottom.

I lingered just long enough to make certain the harbor police—all four of them—had the enraged Marama under a still noisy restraint, then walked as briskly as discretion would allow across the parking lot to my faithful steed. I'd suddenly remembered pressing business back at the office.

For instance: were those trees still growing on the roof of the cathedral?

But I'm glad to be able to assure you that in spite of these minor slings and arrows, taken as a whole Caneili's First Case had a happy ending all the way around.

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Tamuela's rakish BMW coupé was restored to working order for a measly twenty-four hundred dollars or so, considerably less (as I was obligated to point out to him at some length) than the cost of purchasing a new one for his associate in graverobbing, the uncouth Marama.

Grandpa's remains, such as they were, turned up in the coffin, which was found—to the general stupefaction—in the hold of Marama's fishing boat once it was refloated to the surface. They were reburied with due ceremony in the little graveyard in the valley.

Marama, I heard, came in for a few days of unceremonious examination by various members of the forces of public order but was eventually allowed to go his unpleasant way, unrepentant perhaps, but agreeably bandaged and battered.

Madame Tamuela's girlish spirits had been more than a little dampened by her unexpected plunge into the harbor and subsequent miraculous escape from drowning, and she now tiptoed skittishly around her husband with the wariness of a feral cat.

"So, you see, everything turned out for the best," I told Tamuela cheerfully as I watched him reluctantly count out the grimy bills that represented my modest fee. "And all because your wife's foot slipped off the brake at the right moment."

Tamuela looked up in surprise.

"Oh no," he said. "That isn't what happened. That was Grandpa. He wanted to go back home, so he made the brakes fail."

I considered the implications of this for a minute or so. Eventually I said: "Hrmph. So now you think you've got Grandpa on *your* side?"

"I'm sure of it." He beamed at me with all his moldy brown teeth. "Now that he's had his lesson, I just *know* that our luck is going to change."

Maybe it is.

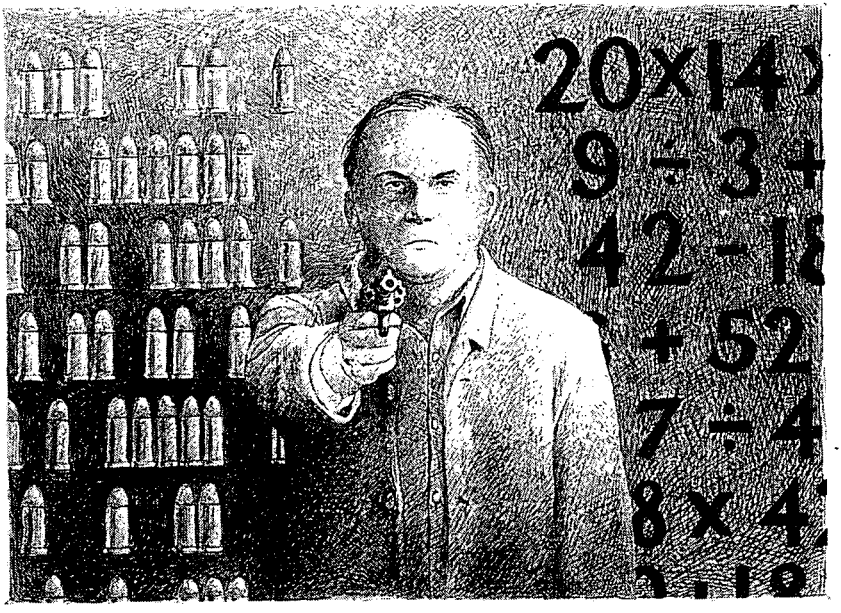
Just yesterday I saw a jolly picture in the local paper of a Mr. and Mrs. Tamuela Tehotua attending the wedding in Los Angeles of their eldest son Hiro to a ravishing young American heiress whom he'd happened to meet while changing the tire on her rented car not far from his father's home in the districts—or from Grandfather's peaceful grave deep in the cool dark valley.

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FICTION

The System

by Steve Lindley



"I must tell you, Mr. Cutter, I'm a little disappointed that you felt you had to take this to the papers." Disappointed wasn't exactly what Fontana meant. An hour ago he just might have leaned across his desk and whacked his visitor's nose with a rolled-up newspaper. "Did you read this morning's edition?"

"Some of it," Cutter answered. Fontana picked the paper up off his desk, already opened, and read out loud.

" 'State refuses ex-Marine six

Illustration by Richard Crist

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million dollar lottery prize. Claims winning ticket is invalid. Blames computer error.' " Fontana eyed Cutter's stubby frame. " 'Ex-Marine'?"

"Yes. I served in Vietnam in the early sixties. It hasn't been easy—"

"No, I'm sure it hasn't." Try having my job sometime, jerk, Fontana thought. The guy had seemed like such a harmless little pudgeball the last time he had been in Fontana's office. Today he was different. Quieter, more resigned to the fact that he wasn't the grand prize winner in the state lottery drawing.

"This bit about the 'winning ticket.' We went through all that last time you were here. You never had a winning lottery ticket."

Cutter fumbled with the coat in his lap and pulled out a small card. He placed it on Fontana's desk. "It says here on the ticket that it's my receipt. Those are the winning numbers of last Saturday's drawing."

Fontana stared down at the card. There they were: 8, 19, 24, 28, 31, 35. He fought back the urge to snatch it up, rip it into shreds, and say to Cutter, "Ticket? What ticket?" Cutter must have seen some of that in his eyes. He grabbed up the ticket and tucked it back in his coat.

Fontana rubbed his eyes. "Mr. Cutter, there was no winner in last week's lottery. The tobacco shop in which you purchased your ticket never entered your submission into our computers. They were careless. Their machine wasn't working properly, and they didn't double-check. It happens all the time, it's just that most people don't pick the right combination, so they never find out. Believe me, your ticket has no more value than if you had written the six correct numbers on the back of an envelope and stuffed it in your sock drawer."

Cutter only stared into his lap, gritting his teeth. Biting the bullet? Fontana wondered. He would have felt better if the man had been making a little more noise. The sullen silence was unnerving.

"So that's it," Cutter finally said. "There's no one else I can talk to."

Fontana nodded toward the paper. "Seems to me you've talked to just about everybody already. What do you think the publicity is going to do for you? You think the public is going to stop playing the lottery in some sort of protest? On the contrary, since the six million you didn't win has been added to next Saturday's three million, it should be one of the hottest lotteries ever.

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"Look, Mr. Cutter, I can't say I know how you feel, but it isn't as if you ever really had the six million. I'm a gambler myself. I hate to think of all the times I just knew I was about to pick up all the marbles, only to have it all blow up in my face. And we did offer you fifty free tickets in this coming Saturday's lottery."

"Yes, fifty chances to win," Cutter said, still fumbling with his coat. "What are the odds of picking all six winning numbers, Mr. Fontana?"

"Well, with fifty chances—"

"What are the odds of the same man's choosing the correct numbers two Saturdays in a row?"

Ingrate bastard. Fontana was getting nervous. His index finger wanted to pop the intercom button to Mrs. Glumfeld, his secretary. He kept busy searching his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

"We don't have statistics on that, Mr. Cutter."

"No? No, of course you don't. So that's it. Well, I don't want your fifty tickets. You said you're a gambling man. That's good. I kind of counted on that. See, I have another game here, with better odds."

Fontana's finger was out of the cigarette pack and moving quickly back to the intercom. It stopped when Cutter's hand came out from under his coat holding a small revolver, that seemed to have almost no barrel at all. Stubby. It matched Cutter.

"What's that?"

"This," Cutter answered, holding the black revolver in both hands, "is a High Standard Sentinel .22. It's an unusual gun, one of the few double action revolvers that fires nine rounds."

Fontana closed his eyes. Damn. He knew something like this was coming. Just another few seconds and he could have—

"Are you going to shoot me?"

"Maybe. And just do yourself a favor and stay away from that intercom button. Fold your hands on your desk, okay?"

Fontana did as he was told. He didn't get to be where he was by breaking under pressure. Ride it out. The man was on automatic pilot. Keep him calm.

"First, the good news. Don't look so worried." Cutter was becoming more animated. "Only three of the chambers hold live bullets. The other six are loaded, but I've taken the powder out of the cartridges. You'll hear the hammer click against the case, but that's all."

He'll hear what? "What do you want?"

"I want you to pick six numbers, Mr. Fontana. Pick six

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numbers and see if you win."

"Cutter, I thought we were two grown men."

"Have you ever played Russian roulette? No, I figured not. I have, once, with my roommate in college. We'd been in the Marines together. I don't have to tell you who won. I mean, I'm here. I don't see him."

Fontana just sat, feeling his body squeeze the blood into his head. Deluxe sicko. Oh, Mrs. Glumfeld, where are you? Where the hell are the phone calls that come two hundred a minute every other morning?

"We were in our dorm room," Cutter continued. "I went first. Nothing. Then he took the gun. We were only going to go one round each. We weren't crazy, just a little drunk. Only the bullet was in the second chamber. He was on the bed, blew his brains all over the blacklight poster behind him. Ever see blood under a blacklight? It's not red. It's black."

"You want the six million. I can't get it for you myself—"

"I know what you're thinking. If there are only three live rounds, you might be able to jump me before I had a chance to hit the right chamber. That would be a gamble. That would be a game."

"I wasn't thinking that."

"No? Well, you must be now, now that I've mentioned it. But don't do it. The bullets in this gun aren't just arranged randomly. I have a system. I know just where the live rounds are."

"Cutter, what the hell do you want?"

"I want to hear a number, Mr. Fontana. Nothing else. I mean it, if the next word out of your mouth isn't a number from one to nine, I'm going to blow your brains out."

Fontana sat, hands still stiffly folded. He wanted to scream. He wanted to jump out the window. He did not want to pick a number.

"Come on. We don't have all day. The game is in full gear. No! No, you were about to say something that wasn't a number. Don't you want the chance to win I'm giving you? I'll give you three seconds. No kidding. One . . . two . . ."

"Two!" Two? He wasn't really going to say that. But he did.

Cutter gingerly rotated the cylinder with his index fingers and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

That was it. It happened so fast. Some tension left Fontana's muscles, rippling down to the tips of his numb fingers. It was like the moment your parachute actually opens, or the second after you hit the water after a high dive you don't really want to take.

"Very good," Cutter said.

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"Next number. Come on, the odds are still greatly in your favor, even though you haven't had a chance to figure out the system. Three seconds. One . . . "

System? What the hell was this?

" . . . Two . . . "

"Seven." Lucky seven. Please, goddamn lucky seven. Cutter's fingers again turned the cylinder, five light ticks, the sound of a bicycle chain freely turning.

Click.

"Very good."

System. Fontana had to take the chance. His words came fast, spewed out on a string.

"Mr. Cutter, please. The system. What do you mean?"

"One . . . "

"No, give me—"

" . . . Two . . . "

"One! One, dammit!"

Click.

"That's three. The angels are with you, Mr. Fontana, but the odds were still in your favor."

"A moment, please. A break in the game. Just explain what you mean by a system." Fontana didn't even notice the sweat dripping from his face onto his knuckles.

Cutter did.

"Yes, my system. You know every real gambler has his own system. What do you base yours on? Birth dates? Your license plate number? I based mine on your lottery. That's a hint, by the way. Figure out my system, a chance to beat the odds."

System based on the lottery. Based on the lottery numbers Cutter had chosen. Six numbers, six empty chambers. What were those numbers: 8, 19, 24, 28, 31, 35. And what numbers had Fontana picked so far: 1,2, 7. How did they relate?

"Okay, I gave you a hint. Now, a number, please."

Fontana closed his eyes again. He couldn't think while staring into the barrel of a gun. Ability to think under pressure. Hah! There were limits.

"One . . . Don't get too worried, the odds are still fifty-fifty. Two . . . "

"Four." Did he just grab that number out of the air, or had his subconscious already found the system?

Click.

"Fine," Cutter said. "Two more numbers. I warn you, though, from here on the odds are stacked against you."

Fontana's eyes stayed squeezed shut. Pick a number, one to nine. Nine chambers in the gun. Forty-five numbers to choose from on the lottery card. Nine times five is forty-five. So what? 1, 2, 4, 7; only one number he had chosen (the seven), multiplied by five, equalled any number Cutter had picked in

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the lottery (the thirty-five). But was he getting close?

The face of Fontana's high school math teacher popped into his head. Fontana remembered asking him, "What good is all this math going to do us in the real world?"

"The next number, please."

Nine times five is forty-five. The total number of chambers, times five, equals the number of numbers on the card. The sum. The sum of 8, 19, 24, 28, 31, 35—God, this was hell. One-forty-five! Add them together, the sum is one hundred forty-five.

"Three seconds . . . "

What was the sum of the numbers Fontana had chosen so far? 1, 2, 4, 7—fourteen. Fourteen. Fourteen times five is seventy. Could that be it? That simple? The sum of all the numbers of the empty chambers, times five, equals the sum of the numbers Cutter had chosen on the card.

" . . . One . . . "

So, the last two numbers he chose, added together, multiplied by five, would have to equal the difference between seventy and one-forty-five. That difference was seventy-five. Seventy-five divided by five was fifteen. The only two numbers left that would equal fifteen—

" . . . Two . . . "

"Six!"

The cylinder rotated between Cutter's fingers.

Click.

Cutter resettled himself in his chair. "Was that just luck?"

Fontana didn't answer. He could still see the face of his old math teacher, and he was smiling at him.

So that was it. Not much of a system.

"Now we're down to the last number, Mr. Fontana. It's do or die."

Fontana stared hard at Cutter, the cocky little bastard.

"One . . . "

The fear gone, Fontana's anger was coming back in a hot flash. But what happened now? The little pudgeball had held him scared to death for—

" . . . Two . . . "

"Nine, Mr. Cutter."

The blast threw Fontana backwards along with his chair. He bounced off the plate glass window behind him, then fell forward onto the floor, behind the desk, out of Cutter's sight. Cutter just sat, holding the gun, the smell of powder bringing back memories.

"Like I said, Mr. Fontana." A commotion was already sounding in the outer office. Had he remembered to lock the door when he came in? "Based on your lottery. Even when you win, you lose. You can't beat the system."

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THE STORY THAT WON



Andre Kertesz

The February Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by David J. Pettigrew of Westwood, New Jersey. Honorable mentions go to Debra Landers Codd of Winton, California; Kirk J. LoCicero of Baton Rouge, Louisiana; S. Rose Keithley of Brimfield, Illinois; Steven Wineinger of North Haven, Connecticut; Pamela J. Lobaugh of Redlands, California; Don Shaffer of San Mateo, California; Jeffrey M. McCoy of Fisher, Illinois; Barbara J. Mayberry of Appomattox, Virginia; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Colleen L. Kolesnik of Brooklyn, New York; Stuart Brynien of Brooklyn, New York; Bette Lou George of Alliance, Ohio; and Gordon W. Bunde of Houston, Texas.

DULLSVILLE, U.S.A. by David J. Pettigrew

Detective Washburn poured another cup of coffee, the fifth tonight, and headed back to his desk where an elderly couple had just been seated.

"If only I was a cop in a big city like Chicago or New York where there's real crime," he thought wistfully, "instead of the petty stuff that I see here in Regalsville, South Dakota."

"We're here to report a crime," said the old man.

Both were dressed in old, well-worn clothes, circa 1920. He was wearing an old stained straw hat, and she had a babushka wrapped tightly around her head.

"Okay," said Washburn as he put down his mug and loaded up the typewriter with a fresh form. "You're the Fitzgeralds who witnessed old lady Carter torch her husband with a flamethrower. Right?"

"No, sir," started the old man. "We're the . . . "

"Reynoldses," interrupted the detective, "who watched that gang of motorcyclists drag the Simons family through the street and then hang them from the school flagpole by their toes?"

"Oh, nothing that exciting," replied the woman. "We're the Coopers. While we were peeking through our back fence this morning, the Regalsville Hotel and everyone in it disappeared before our very eyes."

Washburn suppressed a yawn and started typing, wishing he was in Chicago or New York.

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FICTION

Perfect Pitch

by Rob Kantner



The kiddie cop sucked in his gut, thrust out his chest, and imitated an adult male voice. "Okay, bud, that's far enough. Turn around and take a walk."

I gestured at the pizza boxes stacked at my right. "Domino's, partner. 'We deliver,' and all that."

The kid squared his bony shoulders under his wrinkled blue uniform shirt. "Nobody goes in without authorization."

I eyed him, from the gold braid on his K-Mart cop cap and the intimidating private-security insignia on his shoulders to the Sam Browne belt (a Sam Browne belt, in Detroit yet, for God's sake) and the holster that housed cuffs, walkie-talkie, and a very official looking .38 Police Positive. Stifling the impulse to ask if he had a permit to carry that thing, I fished a yellow flimsy out of my shirt pocket and scanned it. "Delivery for Jerry Mattson, Commando Studios, Seven Mile at Evergreen. Two deluxes loaded, with anchovies. Gah! This the place?"

The kid's expression changed from ersatz Eastwood to honest, innocent relief. "Oh. Well, okay. Take that door there, go down

Illustration by George Thompson

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the hall. Studio's on the left. Mattson's the drummer." He turned and swaggered past me, creaking from all the leather and jingling so loud I was tempted to check him for spurs.

Inside the door was a long, windowless, dim, tiled hall. A trash barrel being handy, I dropped the empty pizza boxes into it without a glance and walked jauntily to the end, where an unlocked door gave me entrance to the studio.

There were a lot of people in there to notice me, but no one did. On the wall to my right was a broad glass window, behind which sat a bearded, skinny fellow with headphones holding down his short, curly hair. He was virtually surrounded by the blinking lights and turning tapes of electronic equipment. The room in which I stood was a crowded, layered maze of wires, microphones, conduits, musical instruments, and people, most of whom I knew at least by sight. You couldn't have been a rock and roll fan from the early sixties on without knowing the faces of the Sidewalk Commandos.

The hulking, bearded Jerry Mattson lounged behind a Ludwig drum set to my left. Bill Cuffaro and Gil Gould, the Mutt and Jeff of guitarists, stood in front, instruments at the ready. Lon Maretsky, ponytailed bass player, leaned against the back wall. In the corner near the glass window, facing me, was a Steinway grand piano with the tall, outdoorsy Ellen Long standing in the curve, a baritone saxophone draped in front of her. Facing Long, sitting at the keyboard, was the short, round-faced, impassioned singer, group leader, and principal composer: Lisa Goodnight.

I leaned against the wall and, with my right hand, fished my .45 automatic from my waistband and held it out of sight behind my back.

A voice issued from an intercom, and the lips of the man behind the glass moved: "Rolling tape."

Lisa Goodnight said, "Okay, let's call that B, and from here it's a bounce-down to A-seven, people, with a nice tasty break from Jerry, then we back into the basic with vocal rolling on top. Three, four."

The instruments commenced on cue, filling the smallish room, guitars and piano and bass underneath; then after a fluttering break from Mattson, Lisa Goodnight began to sing. I honestly don't remember the words. I was gripped in place, the only realities in the room the music of her voice and the warm steel of the .45 in my hand.

After sixteen bars the guitars trailed off, but the piano continued, and Lisa Goodnight,

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leaning close to the bulbous microphone, delivered four more lines, then quit, sagged back, panted. The other group members stared at her.

"Rolling tape," the engineer said metallically.

Goodnight snapped, "I *know* we're rolling tape. You don't have to keep reminding me."

Ellen Long leaned toward Goodnight. "Where'd *those* lyrics come from? I mean, the sheets don't—"

"Who knows?" Goodnight answered. "Hope we caught 'em. We rolling tape?"

"Rolling tape," came the voice.

Good a time as any. I stood forward from the wall, raised my .45, and pointed it two-handed at Goodnight, sighting down the long steel length of the weapon at the half-inch section between her upper lip and her nose.

Cuffaro and Gould, who'd been talking quietly, stopped and stared at me.

"You're dead, bitch," I said, and fired.

Jeannie Riley, my current "interest," as the gossip columns would say, loves word games. One favorite is making words out of the three-letter segments of license plates. Another is coming up with one word that describes someone completely.

Her word for Arthur Brooks, whom she met once, is "dour."

I thought of that as I sat across from his area-code-size mahogany desk a couple of days before my visit to Commando Studios. Arthur Brooks is pushing sixty, thin and short with a square, grim face fronted with rimless glasses and topped with white, crewcut hair. He owns fifty three-piece suits, all of them first-rate navy blue, and six hundred shirts, all of them white-on-white and built of a material invulnerable to the ravages of wear. His eyes have the cold, accepting look of a man who has dealt with much in his years of representing people with things to hide, including members of the union for which I once worked way back in them bad old days.

The spines of hundreds of law books stared at us as we exchanged banalities. Then he said, "The Sidewalk Commandos."

I looked long at him. "Decent band, least while J. D. Fredericks was alive. Haven't recorded since then."

"Lisa Goodnight."

I shrugged. "Good singer. I hear Fredericks and her were tight. She's supposedly running the show now. You want to know more, check the latest *Rolling Stone*."

"They're working here in Detroit now, you know."

"Sure. Goodnight's from here,

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Dearborn Heights as I recall. So after Fredericks died she moved the group from New York to here."

I was starting to get impatient, and Brooks picked up on it. "Your assignment," he said coldly, "is Lisa Goodnight. I want to know what gives."

I got out a short cork-tipped cigar and took my time lighting it with a kitchen match struck on my thumbnail. I certainly could use the work—between my jobs as an apartment maintenance supervisor and private detective I just barely keep financially afloat—and I knew Brooks was good for the tariff, but I'm funny, I like to work toward more specific objectives than simply finding out what gives.

But lawyers in general, and Arthur Brooks in particular, are not an especially forthcoming breed. To give myself time to think I asked, "Got any aspirin?"

He blinked. "Certainly. Got a headache, Ben?"

"Nope. Had two wisdom teeth removed yesterday."

He opened his drawer. "Little old for that, aren't you?"

"I put off pain as long as I can, and now I'm glad I did." I *was* hurting. My lower jaw felt like it had two craters in it in which helmeted men worked industriously with picks.

Brooks tossed a tin of Anacin onto his desk. "Didn't they prescribe anything for pain?"

"Sure. Tried one. Made me exhibit symptoms of senility."

"You mean people could tell the difference?"

I looked sharply at Brooks and saw that the dourness had given way to a big, toothy, delighted smile that radiated from his entire being. I grinned, took a big pull on my cigar, and said, "You're a riot, Art, I always said that. Now. What's the deal on Goodnight? Come on, pal, give over."

The aura of humor was gone in a flash. He leaned forward, forearms on the edge of his desk, and slowly rubbed ten fingertips together. "I'm her personal attorney. It's low-volume business, the kind of g.p. work I don't normally handle and certainly don't need, but I was her father's lawyer so I've kept the account. Call me sentimental."

Like hell. "Okay."

A light on his phone began to blink soundlessly. Brooks ignored it. "She brought the band here last summer, about three months after J. D. Fredericks died in New York. I've seen her two or three times. Frankly, Ben, I've become more troubled each time. Certainly she's in mourning—she was close to Fredericks, as you know—but she doesn't seem to be pulling out of it. To be blunt, as her

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attorney and a friend of her father, I've become concerned that she's not competent to take care of herself. My sources of information are, for all practical purposes, nil. I need to have someone I can trust, someone with impeccable judgment, to get close to her, assess her and her situation, and, to the greatest extent possible, solve whatever problems she has."

"You got money to burn, huh, Art?"

"Whatever it takes." The finger-rubbing stopped. "I have the sick feeling something is terribly wrong with her, Ben."

I looked sharply at him, surprised at the tension and depth of feeling in his courtroom-trained voice. I shrugged. "Well, okay, okay. Couple-three days, I can size the thing up and get back to you." I watched him give me a curt, stiff nod. "But," I added, "what's my pitch? How do I get in there? You got any thoughts on that?"

Brooks's flat face relaxed, and craftiness came into his eyes. "Matter of fact, yes. A security angle. They get a lot of attention, as you know. I understand they've hired rent-a-cops to protect them. I don't think this is adequate. I suggest that you get inside the group by demonstrating just how poor their security is—the idea being that you have been hired by me to arrange better security. . . ."

Jerry Mattson said, "You picked a hell of a way to show how bad our security is, Perkins." He picked up my .45 from the desk and hefted it with his massive hand. "Pretty cheap stunt. Blanks and everything. Lisa's walking a precarious edge now, this kinda thing, on top of what happened to J. D., it's just bad *taste,* you know? It just won't *do!*"

"Well, maybe I let my taste for street theater get away from me," I said. "But the point remains. Those kiddie cops, you know they're worthless if a lug like me can walk right past 'em with a couple of empty pizza boxes, a line of improvised malarkey, and a .45 automatic." I reached into my pocket for a clip of .45 ammunition and waved it at the drummer. "Some guy could just sashay in here with *these* in the butt instead, and then you'd be scraping Goodnight's brains off the walls."

"Don't remind me."

"So what I've got for you is solid security. Guys who carry and know how to use, and know the moves, and know how the street creeps operate. Plus me on Goodnight personal, guaranteed."

"We heard your pitch already. Ellen's checking it out with Leese. So till then we wait, and you're not going nowhere."

So we waited, and I smoked,

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and Mattson fidgeted, and the guitarists standing behind him chattered mindlessly, till finally, as the daylight dimmed in the window above Mattson's head, there came a tap on the door, and the rangy, elegant Ellen Long came in. "Lisa says okay, Jerry."

Mattson said, "Okay."

Ellen Long faced me.

"Lisa's gone on home," she said. "She wants you over there later." She gave me a Dearborn Heights address, and handed me a small flat box. "Give her this when you get there." I looked down and saw that it was an eight-inch reel to reel tape.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, feeling foolish. She smiled at me and left. I turned to Mattson. "Piece." He tossed my .45, which I caught one-handed. I booted the clip of blanks, worked the action once to eject the blank under the hammer, jacked in the clip of live rounds, and worked the action once again to put one in the chamber. "Real thing, this time," I told him, securing the automatic in my waistband against my spine.

He rose to full massive height behind the desk and walked around it. "Far out," he winked at me, then herded the guitarists out, still chattering.

I breathed deeply, suddenly wanting a fistful of beers and the opportunity to tell the story to my cronies at Under New Management. But I had work to do. I sat down at Mattson's desk, picked up the phone, and began punching numbers. I don't know about other cities, but in Detroit there are guns for hire, good guns, toted by good men who work for their buck, and inside twenty minutes I'd lined up a squad of them, guys like Johnston, Rader, Rockecharlie, Scozzafava, and the rest.

As Commando Studios emptied into the noisy evening, I fired the kiddie cop service, welcomed the new men, gave them one-on-one duty on the band members, and then, finally, tape in hand, headed out into the suddenly magical evening toward the Dearborn Heights home of my personal assignment: Lisa Goodnight.

It sat square in the middle of a small, lower-middle-class neighborhood south of Joy Road and east of Telegraph on the frontier of Dearborn Heights where it butts up against Dynamite Park at the Detroit line. There the houses are small, two and three bedroom bungalows on oversized, wooded lots, none of them, if I'm any judge, running more than forty or forty-five bills. It occurred to me, as I parked my Mustang at the curb in front of Lisa Goodnight's place, that a person with her bucks could af-

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ford a lot better neighborhood than this.

The door swung back at my knock and Lisa Goodnight, in shadow from the lights of the living room behind her, said, "Ah. My assassin. Come in."

She led me into the small living room, where the house's outward impression of modesty was instantly erased. The furnishings and decorations were first-rate, brand-new, and perfectly balanced: the smoke-gray sectional sofa, the twin matching easy chairs, the deep, luxurious, white shag carpet, the chrome and glass shelving units bearing books, and the massive entertainment center on the far wall holding a forty-inch Sony Trinitron, a video deck, and an audio system worth more than everything I own put together. A white brick fireplace attended by big pillows scattered before the hearth and illuminated by track lighting stared out from the far wall. It was a cosy, comfortable room, rich without being ostentatious.

Lisa Goodnight faced me. She was shorter than I'd thought, barefoot, dressed in snug embroidered jeans and a loose white shirt whose tails were knotted above her navel, showing a tan, flat stomach. Her face was smooth, youthful, vulnerable, one of those faces composed of parts that were individually all wrong but collectively made a thing of beauty—those dark eyes, trim nose, wide cheekbones, direct, assertive chin. Like the rest of her, her loose, wavy, short brunette hair was unadorned yet perfect. Though her name suggested British descent, I sensed in her dark eyes, unassuming posture, and general air of melancholy the influence of eastern Europe. The woman with me now was quite different from the sharp-tongued shrew I'd taken a shot at in Commando Studios.

She asked in her resonant voice, "Got something for me?"

I'd forgotten I held the tape box. "Yes, ma'am."

She grinned. "For God's sake, call me Lisa. I'm younger than you."

"Not by much." I handed her the tape.

"Thanks." She looked me up and down. "So 'Babbling' Brooks sent you to guard me."

I snorted an honest laugh. "'Babbling'?"

"He's so sweet. He frets and fusses about me as if I'm still two years old. Well, if Babs thinks I need you, who am I to argue? C'mon, we'll tour the place and you decide if I'm secure or not."

She wasn't. Plus points: the front was well lighted, the back was fenced, neighboring houses sat a distance away, thanks to the big lots with no clumps of trees to hide intruders. Minus

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points: the locks were a joke, particularly on the windows. I made mental notes as we walked through the house, which included a well-equipped kitchen, luxurious master bedroom, and fully equipped tape editing studio in the second one. I mean, she had enough electronic gear in the place to keep an army of junkies financed for a year.

Back in the living room, I ran it down for her: the next morning I'd send some guys in to install an electronic alarm system and new locks top to bottom. She paced the room aimlessly as I talked, feet shuffling the shag, bare arms dangling, and when I was done she looked at me. "What about you?"

"I'll be around. I'll cover you from a distance, you'll hardly know I'm there. Like tonight, I'll keep watch from my car at the curb."

Her lassitude turned abruptly to animation. "Oh, but that's awful for you, sitting in your car for hours and hours!"

"Comes with the job."

She skipped over to the stereo system, and flicked a couple of buttons. From the massive speakers softly sounded the intro of an old Commandos album, *Eclectic Guitars*. She faced me again and the lassitude was back. "This is a nice neighborhood. You don't have to turn my house into Fort Knox."

"This is Dearborn Heights," I retorted.

"This is my home. I grew up on this street, two doors up." She smiled sadly. "They didn't want to sell, so I bought this one."

Well, that explained why she hadn't bought into Bloomfield, Farmington, or Birmingham like the other Commandos. As the music gently filled the room, I looked into Goodnight's eyes, remembering Brooks's comment: "I have the sick feeling something is terribly wrong with her, Ben." Certainly her demeanor was erratic, energized one moment, sluggish the next. Certainly she acted like no one I'd ever met. But in addition to being a singing star and composer and leader of the near-legendary Sidewalk Commandos, she was also a pure creative, and creatives are known to have toys in the attic, it's almost a prerequisite. And I realized even that early that I was losing my hard-edged street objectivity. This was Lisa Goodnight, not some shoe clerk.

I cleared my throat. "Well, I've done about all I can for now. I'll go take up my position. See you tomorrow."

"But you haven't had your drink yet! Come on, let me be hospitable." She smiled. "You can protect me just as well from in here, can't you?"

"Why sure. Um, how about a beer?"

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"Is that all? I've got anything you want here. Anything."

"Well, maybe a shot of black Jack to pave the way."

"Ah," she beamed, "*Dee*troit. It's good to be with a real *Dee*troit man again. No da-queeries for you, huh, Mr. Detective. Please, make yourself at home."

She skipped out of the living room into the kitchen. I ambled to the front door, peered out, saw nothing, secured the lock, then sank into the sectional sofa at the end nearest the door. Lisa returned with a full shot-glass and bottle of Stroh's for me, and a pint of redpop for herself. As she reclined on the sofa halfway down from me and pulled one tightly bluejeaned leg under her, I raised the shot to her and dumped it down my throat with one smooth swallow, then cooled the sudden inflagration with a couple of slugs of beer. The voice of experience, which I can take or leave, said: Steady on, old son, this is a job, remember?

I gestured at her redpop. "Goin' easy, huh?"

"Oh," she said lightly, "I can't drink. In fact, I have to be real careful about drugs of any kind. The least little thing can mess me up."

"Oh."

She sipped at her pop. "Surprised?"

"Well, I've read stuff."

"Bet you expected to walk in here and see a pile of coke on the table there, with spoons and straws and everything."

"I don't go anywhere expecting anything. I wait and see for myself." I pulled a short cork-tipped cigar out of my shirt pocket. "Mind?"

"Please." She put a bare foot out and slid an ashtray on the coffee table toward me as I fired up the cigar. She watched me keenly as I exhaled a cone of smoke into the music-filled air, then said, "Are you a fan, Ben?"

"Casually. I like Springsteen, Clapton, Seger, Pink Floyd, Lennon, Eddie Anger, at least his old stuff."

"How about the Commandos?" she asked slyly.

"Oh sure, some of it. Y'all haven't put out anything new since Fredericks died, though. That a new album you were working on today?"

She laughed strangely. "Just something for the can. We've got enough in there for three or four l.p.'s, but I'm not ready to put out a new package yet. Did you enjoy the session today?"

"I only heard a minute or two of it. But yeah, live performance, that's what makes it for me."

She bounced herself up abruptly to tuck her other leg under her. "Oh hey, then you'd enjoy one of those bar band gigs we do every now and then."

"I'd like that a lot. But you

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don't publicize 'em. Obviously."

"Don't tell Rocket this, but we'll be doing one before too long. I'll let you know when and where. Just as soon as I get the special project done."

I busied myself with drinking some beer, trying to figure out which question to ask, and how. "Who's Rocket?"

"Oh yeah," she laughed, "how would you know? Jack Rocket's our business manager. Mr. Numbers. Hates the bar band gigs like poison, he's always pushing for the big dates, stadiums and stuff, where the bucks are. Well, hell!" she said with fervor, "we're filthy rich already, each record makes us more so, we don't need the big dates—"

"I'm Perkins, not Rocket," I interrupted.

She charged right on. "—the audience is one big faceless mob. In the little bars, fifty or a hundred people, you get close, you feel them, you can try things out, get instant feedback. But Rocket, well, he was with J. D. from the beginning, and . . . J. D. could handle him, but I don't know—"

Such volatility in that face, from assertive leader to angry fighter to little lost lady, all in the space of a sentence or two. As she went suddenly silent, so did the music, then auto-reverse kicked the tape over to the second side. I tapped a long gray hunk off the end of my cigar and asked, "What's the special project?"

She looked at me sharply, as if I'd read her mind, then said off hand, "J. D.'s last album. Hey, Ben, your beer's gone. Fresh one?"

"Sure. Just that, please."

She set her redpop down on the coffee table, sprang agilely to her feet, and headed for the kitchen. "How about a fire? The stuff's all there."

"Gotcha." She disappeared, I shut away my unwholesome thoughts, and grabbed her bottle of redpop. It was less than half gone. I sniffed it, then took a tentative sip. It seemed to be nothing but soda, with no special ingredients that I could detect.

A teepee of wadded newspapers, kindling, and logs was already built in the fireplace, so I fired it up from my cigar, sat on the upraised hearth, and studied it as the blaze went up, almost at once. Lisa returned, handed me a cold Stroh's, then dropped and sat crosslegged below and very near to me, leaning on a cushion against the hearth. The flickering glow from the fireplace played off her face, revealed flecks of gold in her dark, wavy hair, and made her look even younger than she did already. Twisting her strong fingers together in her lap, she said without looking at me,

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"You know, it was twenty years ago I joined J. D."

"Just a barefoot teenager, huh?"

"I was eighteen." She half-smiled. "Behind the stadium after the last Detroit concert on the Commandos' first big tour. Two A.M., for God's sake. I was back there with a mob of kids waiting to see the band leave. All hell broke loose when they came out, everyone pushing and shoving, and something propelled me right up to J. D. We talked, and he asked me to come along, and—"

I said nothing, and she looked me in the eyes, face hard. "There was nothing personal, not then, anyway. It took me a long time to figure out why he took me with him, why he knew I'd be good in the band. You know why?"

"Well, uh—"

"I have perfect pitch."

"What's that?"

"The ability to identify the pitch—A, B, C, and so on—of any sound you hear. Or the ability to make any of those sounds without hearing anything first. It's very rare."

"Oh." Nice piece of trivia to drop on the guys in the saloon sometime.

"I'd been a pianist since I was four, but I didn't know I had perfect pitch. J. D. knew, though. Somehow. And something else, something that's never been published. Everybody in the Commandos has perfect pitch. Even Jerry, the drummer."

The blazing fire was beginning to cook my back. I set my beer on the hearth, slid down to the floor, and leaned against the cool slate.

Her warm hand touched my forearm. I glanced at her quickly. She said, "You remind me of him."

Wait a minute.

She studied my arm, squeezing it gently with both hands. "So strong. You're a working man, like J. D. was. Oversized hands, like his, too."

I took her slim wrists with my left hand and held them gently. "Lisa—".

She freed herself, took my two hands in hers, smiled warmly, and kissed me.

I pulled back after a moment, mouth dry. The cold, unemotional voice inside me said, this is Lisa Goodnight, and a client, and a woman you just met —three strikes, fool, you *know* better, this is trouble stamped from the oldest mold in the world. But there's another voice in me, not a voice exactly, but a presence, whose whispers of "what the hell?" I hear via charged adrenaline and a pounding heart. One of my failings is that I seldom prevail against that "what the hell?" voice.

She asked softly, "Do you

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have perfect pitch, Ben?"

"Well, I've completed a pass or two in my time."

She laughed, leaned to me, whispered, "It's been so long," and we kissed again, hard.

I swam up from deep, almost unconscious, sleep. The only light was indirect, from the lamp Lisa had set on the floor on the far side of the bed. The digital clock on the nightstand said four A.M., I was alone in the small bedroom, and my jaw throbbed like hell from my missing wisdom teeth.

I thought dully, first aspirin, then Lisa.

I pulled on my pants. Ambled into the bathroom. Turned on the light. Winced. Opened the medicine chest above the sink. Usual supplies, including aspirin. Took on the childproof cap, finally busted the bastard, and popped three. Put the bottle back, then spotted the squat prescription pill bottle.

The house was silent. I read the label. "*Patient: Lisa Goodnight. Doctor S. Rimm. Directions: One capsule twice per day. Medication: Doxepin HCI.*" I opened the bottle and saw that it was nearly full of big lime green capsules.

I was wide awake now in the shining bathroom, which was redolent of the bright clean scents of her. I capped the bottle again and went to look for her.

I found her in the second bedroom, the one that had been transformed into a tape editing studio. She wore an enormous red flannel shirt and jeans and perched high on a stool at the broad, gleaming console. Lights blinked, several tape units wound slowly, and she hunched there with big headphones clamped down over her ears, her back to me, hands expertly working switches. She jumped when I touched her.

"Oh, hi," she said absently. She stopped whatever she was doing and shoved the headphones back onto her neck.

I showed her the bottle. "Found these in the medicine chest while I was getting some aspirin."

"Yes?"

"What are they?"

"A mild antidepressant." She straightened on the stool and looked at me earnestly. "When J. D. died I . . . I began having some very hard times, you can understand that. I went to Dr. Rimm in New York for help. He knows my history, knows I can't tolerate much in the way of drugs, but he prescribed these and they work well. They're extremely mild, Ben. They take the edge off, that's all."

"Oh. Just nosy, forget it." I surveyed the massive and virtually incomprehensible console. "What are you doing?"

"The special project. J. D.'s

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last album." She hurried on. "It's called *Trapped Behind My Eyes*. It's an idea he had for years and years, worked on it, but never got it done."

"So you're finishing it."

"He taped bits and pieces of it, usually by himself. We've got hundreds of tapes in the archives, rehearsals, jams, ideas, miscellaneous conversation; Ellen takes care of those and gives them to me one by one." She gestured at an open tape box lying on the floor at her feet. "Like the tape you brought me tonight. I'm going through them and pulling out the bits that belong on the album."

I squinted at her. "How can you tell?"

She smiled. "Oh, I just know. It's like a mystery story, finding the clues. I sit here and listen, and then there'll be silence, and then there's a piece of it. Sometimes I even hear J. D.'s voice say, 'Okay, Leese, here's one for the record,' or something like that."

Sounded like a weird ego trip to me, but I said nothing.

"It's a way for me to be close to him for just a little while longer," she added.

I said briskly, "Listen, I'm going to grab a few more z's. You coming?"

"Not now. I'm really rolling here. You don't mind?"

"No." I went to the door, pill bottle in my hand, as she put the headphones back on and flicked switches. If I hadn't stopped at the door and turned for one more look at her, I would not have heard what she said next, it was that soft.

"J. D. is alive."

Back in the bathroom, I put the prescription bottle back in the cabinet, then stared at it, opened it, shook out three pills, put them in my pocket, and replaced the bottle. Then I went back to bed, but try as I might I could not sleep.

Despite her lack of sleep, Lisa Goodnight literally danced into the studio when we got there at nine o'clock. I trailed along behind her and leaned casually against the wall as the other band members milled around, talking. Behind the engineer's window the thin, curly-haired man messed expertly with his switches and pulled on his headphones. Lisa took her position at the piano, called imperiously, "Okay, kids, let's saddle up, okay?" and, as the band members got themselves organized for the day's work, Darryl Rockecharlie, whom I'd assigned to protect Jerry Mattson, tapped my shoulder and motioned me outside into the hall.

"Message for you, boss," he grunted, handing me a pink slip.

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I unfolded it. "See Jack Rocket, 1250 Book Bldg., ASAP."

"Hm. The promoter."

"I don't know who he is," Darryl growled, "but he come on like Mr. King Cowflop on the phone. Like he wants to see you yesterday and won't take no for an answer."

"Well," I shrugged, putting the message away, "Ms. Goodnight's pretty well set here for a while. I might as well run down there and see what this hotshot has on his mind."

Rockecharlie, a cashiered cop long on muscle and short on brains, propped his blocklike hands on his hips under the tails of his cheap coat, revealing the massive butt of a revolver sticking out of his waistband in front. "Listen, Bill and Norris and the rest of the boys are staked out around the joint. They got everything under control. Want me to ride shotgun with you?"

"Nah, thanks, Darryl. You hang tight and keep everybody honest."

I smacked him on his marble-hard upper arm, walked out the back into the bright sunlight, waved at Bill Scozzafava, who covered the back door, and got into my Mustang for the ride downtown.

The door of 1250 Book Building said:

ROCKET INTERNATIONAL
Exclusive Managers of the Sidewalk Commandos
New York

Somebody's a little fuzzy on geography, I thought as I entered the waiting room.

The receptionist, who had Upwardly Mobile Temp written over every blonde, busty inch of her, took my name, muttered conspiratorial things into an intercom, then told me to make myself comfortable; Mr. Rocket would be right with me.

Neither thing happened. The couch on which I sat felt as if it were stuffed with old studded tires, and Mr. Rocket took a full fifty minutes to clear his schedule and make a moment or two to confer with little old me.

When I was finally invited into the sanctum sanctorum, I found it to be much more luxuriously appointed than the waiting room where the mere riffraff had to cool their heels. It was about twenty feet square, with paneled walls dense with dozens of expensively framed, inscribed photographs. Along the far wall was a broad, sun-drenched window from which I could see the Sheraton-Cadillac Hotel, the Pick-Fort-Shelby Hotel, Cobo Hall, and even Canada, lending legitimacy, I supposed, to the use of the word "International" in the name of Rocket's company. Just this side

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of the window was a large mahogany desk with nothing on it but a sheet of paper and a twenty-line telephone set, bulbs unlighted. Behind the desk, reading the paper, sat Jack Rocket.

"Sit down," he said without looking up.

I remained standing, sick of taking orders and in no mood to be patient. Rocket spent a few more minutes on his paper, then stood, hands flat on the shining desktop, and stared at me. He was past middle age, about five eight, and on the slight side, with long wavy black hair, heavy black-framed glasses, a mustache shaped like a frown, and large, knuckly, veined hands. He wore a noisy plaid coat over an open-necked lime green shirt and orange corduroy pants. He seemed to be all teeth, hair, and gold chains, and he wasted no time on amenities.

"I want you away from my group, Perkins."

"You didn't hire me. You can't fire me."

"*I'm* the manager, and *I'm* telling you to get lost."

"You're a dim little plaid-clad hustler in a sublet office with pictures of has-beens on the walls. Pardon me for not being impressed."

"I'm from New *York,* New *York,* and soon as I can talk some sense into Miss Twist Goodnight, we're getting out of these woods back to where we belong. I don't need janitors posing as private detectives messing with my talent."

"I'm from Detroit, Michigan, which is where you are right now, and in case you haven't figured it out by now, bro, here in Detroit we do what we're hired to do, and though I looked real hard I didn't see your signature on the bottom of the check I got."

"If money talks, Perkins, maybe we can do business."

"No sale."

Rocket's face softened into something like a smile. "I talked to Arthur Brooks this morning. He thinks maybe hiring you was hasty. He thinks I ought to wave you off."

"Well, fine, absolutely, if Brooks says so."

"Then we understand each other."

"Just get him on the phone and let me hear it from him."

Rocket's smile winked off. "Brooks ain't the only one who has muscle for hire, if you get my drift."

"Then bring 'em on, Rocket." I turned for the door.

"Perkins." I turned back. Rocket looked serious and worried. "It's the Commandos I'm concerned about. J. D. Fredericks has been dead over a year, and they haven't toured, haven't put together a package,

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haven't done nothing but cost money. I want them screwed together and running in one direction again, that's all, and they don't need outside distractions. Particularly Lisa. You understand?"

"Don't talk policy with me, Rocket," I told him. "You're wasting your time. I'm just a janitor posing as a private detective from out here in the woods. Remember?"

I slammed the door to his office and walked past the receptionist toward the door. At my appearance a man in a dark suit, seated on the couch, threw down his magazine and looked up expectantly. I was entering the elevator before I realized that I'd seen the man before. I was in my Mustang headed back to Commando Studios before I got a handle on where and when I'd seen him. And I was lounging against the wall of the studio, watching the band do a new song, before I remembered who he was.

There was only one relatively private phone in the studio—it was in the office where Jerry Mattson had interviewed me the day before—and it took me a few calls to get hold of Carlo Infante and set up a meet. I hung up the phone and left the office in time to see the engineer—"Rolling Tape," as I thought of him—sauntering around the corner of the hallway away from me. I beetled after him but was intercepted by Lisa Goodnight, Ellen Long on one side and Jerry Mattson on the other.

Lisa hugged me fiercely, stepped back to the smiles of her comrades, and said, "A great session, a *great* session! God, it's good being back in Detroit, I feel like I'm breathing and rolling again. Ben, we're sending out for a couple of kegs of Stroh's and a truckload of Domino's pizza. Let's stuff our faces and get goofy, okay?"

"Nothing sounds better," I said, meaning every word, "but I've got business. Be back for you later, okay?"

"Okay!" She bounced away with Ellen, but Jerry Mattson fell in beside me. He asked, "What's up?"

"Not sure. Don't know." And I truly didn't, then.

The place is called Tattoos, Boots & Motorcycle Parts, but it's really a saloon. It's on Ford Boulevard in the Willow Run area of south Ypsilanti, walled in on one side by World War II defense housing, on another by I-94, on the third by the old Liberator bomber plant, and on the fourth by the four-lane no-man's-land of U. S. 12. It's not my regular drinking hangout (Under New Management has that dubious

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honor), but being a part-time rider of an old customized Harley Sportster, I know the joint and its reputation as a place where you're left alone and absolutely ignored as long as you keep exchanging currency for drinks.

That's why I arranged to meet Carlo Infante there, and true to form he was early. Nobody else knows I know this, but Carlo Infante is one of the top financial wizards of the Detroit organization. He used to work for the rival operation in Pontiac, but a couple of years ago he got on the wrong side of Pontiac boss Ezra Goforth (could be, though I've never confirmed this, due to Carlo's extended affair with Goforth's wife), and the order went out for Carlo to be erased. This information came my way in the course of a completely unrelated matter, but being an unwavering believer in the sanctity of human life, I tipped Carlo off, he gave Goforth's boys the slip, signed on with the Detroit operation (with, as part of his compensation, twenty-four-hour protection), and became, out of gratitude for my tipping him, my chief informant on the mob.

Carlo's grateful to me, but he's not stupid. He won't give anyone, even me, information about organization activity that could endanger him or jeopardize the organization's interests. But otherwise he's a good, willing, and dependable source, and that's why I thought of him when I identified the man in Rocket's waiting room.

"Didn't know you knew Gangemi," Carlo said after I'd ordered a beer.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, old son, which is just as well. Actually, it was through him that I met your boss, Rick Savastano, on a rather unpleasant matter last year. But who cares? Tell me, is Mr. Gangemi still employed as a collector for the organization?"

Infante fidgeted with his cigarette. "Yeah, major accounts work, mainly."

"So, can I assume that, if I saw him in an office this morning, the boss of that office is a delinquent account receivable?"

"Stands to reason."

"Well, then, let's play word association." I paused. "Jack Rocket."

Carlo Infante smiled into my eyes and said, "Transfer business out of N.Y.C."

"Respectable weight?"

"Couple units average balance. I haven't checked the printout this week, but he's been running a few points above that since we took over the business."

"Well, *well*. He been covering the vigorish?"

"Not so you'd notice." Infante gestured at the barmaid for an-

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other round as I fired up a cigar, then faced me. "Story from his end is the old flimsy weak cash flow bit. He manages the Sidewalk Commandos, which you undoubtedly know, and they've been dormant in new product development since coming here, poor revenue enhancement for Jackie boy. He's got big talk about new acts, but each one seems to die in Pittsburgh or Grand Island or someplace. His stories, they break everybody's heart all to hell around the office, believe me."

"I can imagine." The drinks arrived and I schlooked down half of mine, then set the plastic mug down with finality. "So I can safely assume that your friends are displeased with Mr. Rocket?"

Infante's eyes went distant. "We're patient. The word on him from New York is favorable. Rocket's aware of his obligations and isn't hesitant about taking steps to honor them. So we're working with him."

"Uh-huh."

"For the moment."

"Gotcha." I stuck my cigar in my teeth, dropped a sawbuck on the table, and rose. "Nice talking to you, Carlo. Stay well." I threaded through the tables of hulking, tattooed, denim-clad grunts down the narrow hallway by the bathrooms and out the back into the misty gravel parking lot, and crunched to my Mustang at the rear.

I slid the key into the ignition and sat for a moment. I'd picked up something, the end of a thread, by God, and now I'd have to pull on it. Rocket was into mob shylocks on a serious basis and had no means of covering his bills except by making the Sidewalk Commandos produce on stage and in the studio—but the Commandos, under Lisa Goodnight's direction, were disinclined to do this for the moment. Nobody knew better than I how much pressure the mob could put on a debtor. The question was, how far would Rocket, reacting, go to make the Commandos do his bidding?

I reached for the key and had started to turn it when a bullet blew my rear view mirror into a million pieces.

Fortunately, my instinctive reaction was to lunge to my left, so the second and third shots did nothing but blow out the windshield ahead of me. I let out a loud moan and fell to my right onto the passenger seat as the rest of the windshield exploded in shining, noisy fragments around me. Then, silence. The skin of my left temple felt torn, and warm wetness ran tickling through the whisker-stubble under my chin, but otherwise I was unhurt. I squirmed my .45 out from under my belt and held it in a slick hand

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against the floor, and lay in the silence for several long moments, waiting for the face to appear, as I knew it must.

When it didn't, I thought, could he be this stupid? Or, could I be this lucky?

More silence. I flipped open my glove compartment, took out a fistful of ketchup packets from Burger Barn and, one by one, ripped them open and smeared ketchup on my shirt and up my neck and down my arms. I expected curious people to converge on my car, but no one did. Well, it was that kind of neighborhood. Still prone, I wrestled the receiver of my car phone to me, hailed the mobile operator, and, after a moment, raised Elvin Dance, captain of Homicide, Detroit Police Department. It took some convincing, but when he heard me out he chuckled and promised action immediately. I hung up the phone and lay back and practiced being a corpse.

Moments later I heard heavy boots crunching toward my car on the gravel outside. The crunching stopped, replaced by a new sound, a continuous, metallic, liquid *whoooooooong* on my right rear hubcap. Great, I thought sourly. Bad enough my car's been shot up; now I have to put up with *this?* But I stayed put as the sound stopped and the footsteps crunched over to the right side of the car. I had my eyes frozen open in a passable imitation of death, and in my peripheral vision I saw, upside down, a heavy, bearded face staring in at me.

"Oh bummer," the man grunted. "Wow. I mean, what happened to you, man?"

After a moment I answered, "I've been *shot,* and I'm lying here *dead,* fool. What the hell does it look like?"

"Looks like maybe a ketchup bottle exploded all over you or somethin'."

So much for special effects. "Listen, partner, someone just tried to do me, and I want to run a game on him, and I need your help."

"Hey, I can really appreciate your situation. What do you want me to do."

"Wayne County EMS is on the way here now, we got to dress this thing up. Think you can organize a crowd to stand around, stare with sick curiosity, mutter speculation, stuff like that?"

"No problem, leave it to me, man."

Sure enough, inside two minutes half the patrons of Tattoos, Boots & Motorcycle Parts were thronged around the Mustang, talking excitedly, peering in at me one by one. Then events moved quickly. A siren-whooping EMS meat-wagon shrieked dramatically in, a pair of brisk, muscular, white-clad paramed-

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ics lifted me out of the Mustang onto a stretcher and from there into the back of the wagon, and we peeled away, siren screaming, one of the p.m.'s clamping an oxygen mask overly hard on my face as the other one played Andy Granatelli at eighty miles per hour on Michigan Avenue headed toward Detroit.

When we were well clear of the saloon, the paramedic took the oxygen mask off my face and I raised myself on the stretcher, feeling a little lightheaded. He grinned. "I've been on some weird calls, but this one takes the cake, Jake. Don't it take the cake for you, Stu?"

The driver said, "Takes the cake for me, Lee. But we don't mind, we sure don't."

"No, sir," Lee answered, swaying as the wagon changed lanes repeatedly at high speed. "If the cops ask us for a favor, why, we're only glad to oblige. Hoo-boy, fella, you stink of ketchup, you know that?"

Eight minutes later we arrived at the emergency room entrance of Wayne County General Hospital. The paramedics carried me briskly inside to an examining room and left me alone in there with Captain Elvin Dance.

He sat on a stool, as dapper as always in a bronze pin-striped three-piece suit and maroon tie over a white silk shirt. Gold rings gleamed on his cocoa-colored fingers, which he tapped pensively in front of his grin. "Well, sonny," he sighed, "what you got me into this time?"

I told him the whole story except for Carlo Infante's name. When I was done, Dance thought for a long time, then asked, "So now you're dead. That's the word they'll put out from the hospital here, Ben Perkins D.O.A., least till I tell 'em to issue a correction. Okay?" I nodded. Dance pressed, "So what's that gotten you?"

"Well, whoever tried to kill me thinks I'm dead and out of the way, and they'll proceed to do whatever they were going to do before I got into the picture, only now I'll be watching."

"Uh-*huh*. And, pray tell, what's all this trouble I've gone to gotten *me?*"

"Oh, I don't know, Elvin," I grinned. "Except maybe something real ugly seems about to happen to the Sidewalk Commandos, and anything involving them'll get big publicity for the cop on the spot."

"What makes you think I'm interested in publicity?" Dance asked indignantly. After a long silence, he went on, "You make sure I'm put on top of it when it goes down?"

"Guaranteed. I owe you. I'll trade getting your name in the

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papers in return for keeping my name out. Oh, one more thing."

Elvin Dance sighed. "Yeah?"

I fished from my pocket the three pills I'd swiped from Lisa's medicine chest and handed them to him. "Mind having an analysis run on these?"

"Hell, why not? I done stuck my neck out into the next county already. This whole thing better pay off big, Ben."

I nodded. "That's one thing I don't think you have to worry about."

The next morning I sat parked on a side street kitty-corner from the Commando Studios, where I had a good view of the side and back entrances.

I was thick-tongued and scratchy-eyed from lack of sleep. After Dance left the hospital the night before, I took a cab over to the Shine Inn, a car-wash on Telegraph in Redford, where I keep stashed a couple of old but serviceable cars that I use for tailing people from time to time. The beast I collected there was a tired '74 Ford Granada that I'd picked up for peanuts at a police auction. It was ugly but anonymous, faded and half-rusted and in appearance like about nine million other cars on the streets of Detroit, and I drove it to Lisa Goodnight's house, parked up the street, and kept watch.

From the lights, I could tell she was there, and she was there alone. Nobody else was watching her, far as I could tell. No security, no nothing. Dozing unwillingly at ten-minute intervals, I stood watch the rest of the night and then followed her to the studio in the morning, where she was joined by other band members.

My boys were gone, and the kiddie cops were back, lounging around outside the studio, looking vigilant as hell. Mr. Rocket had gotten his wish.

After I'd been there a while, a plain black Chrysler LeBaron made a right onto my street from Evergreen and rolled slowly toward me in the sunlight. I knew before it had come ten feet that it was a cop, and before it had gotten ten feet more that it was Elvin Dance. I held a hand out my window and Elvin U-turned, parked at the curb ahead of me, sauntered back, and slid into the passenger seat.

"This crate hot, Perkins?"

"Certainly not. You wanna see title and registration, ossifer?"

"Nah, just don't let it happen again. Against all *kinda* laws for dead men to be operating a motor vehicle on the public streets."

"Plan was to *pretend* I'm dead, as I recall."

"Hey, you're *dead,* bro. *Free*

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Press says so." Chuckling, he handed me a clipping. It was a two-inch column with a piece of Garfield on the back. The small headline said BELLEVILLE MAN GUNNED DOWN AT YPSI BAR. Details were scant, but included my name, the information that I'd been D.O.A. at Wayne General, that no suspects were in custody, and that the investigation was continuing.

Elvin went on, "Tellya, the city's reeling with shock at this tragedy. Haven't seen such an outpouring of grief since Melon Grungo was found half-decomposed under the D.T.&I. overpass with a quart of Ripple in his hand."

"I'll just bet," I said sourly, stowing the clipping in my pocket to save for my children, of whom I have none.

"Well," Elvin said casually, "your sister Libby read that. Called me this morning after talking to the hospital."

"Wonder why. She inherits no part of my estate and she knows it."

"This ain't funny, man. She was in a state of shock."

"Yeah, bet she dropped her fingernail file and everything."

Elvin let it go. "Listen, on them pills."

I yawned. "Yeah?"

"Well, you gimme three. Two of 'em's the same, a mild antidepressant, kiddie stuff—"

"Doxepin or something."

"Right. But the other one's stronger. Ethchlorvynol."

"You practice that word all the way over here, Elvin?"

The policeman ignored me. "Also known as Placidyl. A potent hypnotic. Definitely high-horsepower stuff. You don't take that unless you know what you're doing."

He opened the car door and put one polished shoe on the curb. "I'll leave it with you for right now. Don't you forget. Next name in the paper better be *mine,* not yours, so you keep me clued in."

I thought about Doxepin and Placidyl and wished that I were a pharmacologist. I wished I had a change of clothes, ketchup-free if not clean. I thought of gunshots blowing the windows out of my prized '71 Mustang and wished the job was done and I was in bed, not necessarily mine and not necessarily alone.

I said, "Sure thing, Elvin. Hey, one thing you can do. Call into the studio for me and send Jerry Mattson, the drummer, walking this way alone, okay? Don't give him my name, we don't want to panic the lad."

Mattson strolled in my direction about fifteen minutes later. He wore faded old denim from neck to boots and walked with that deceptive grace some very big men have. He looked puz-

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zled and tentative till he got close to my car, then he stopped and stared at me, walked quickly to the passenger window, leaned down, and glared.

"Perkins," he said in his shifting-gravel voice.

" 'The reports of my death,' et cetera. Why don't you hop in for a minute."

"What I'm thinking about doing is dragging you out and playing pogo-stick with you up and down this-here street."

"Something on your mind?"

He jerked a kielbasa-sized thumb toward the studio. "That poor lady is inside there burning herself out on accounta you, now it turns out you've pulled some cheap rotten little stunt!"

"Get in. Tell me about it."

He opened the door and seated himself, causing the car to lean perceptibly his way. "We got the word late last night. Lisa went home and was up the whole night. Came in this morning with a new piece, 'Kiss of Death.' You get the idea? J. D.'s dead, you're dead. She thinks it's on account of her."

"That's nutty, Jerry."

He leaned toward me. "You better have a damn good reason for this. Because seeing Lisa mashed up gets me real peeved. Hell, gets *all* of us real peeved. And what about your own friends and family? Don't you care what they'll think when they hear this?"

"My sister Libby knows already. Heard she dropped her fingernail file and everything."

"That's about as funny as a cramp, Perkins."

"Seems to be the consensus. Now hear me out." I gave him my thoughts on Lisa's erratic conduct, the evidence of the doctored pills, and the strategy behind posing as dead. I ended with, "Somebody wants to do her real dirty, Jerry. I got ideas on why, and even a glimmer of who, but there's big holes in the piece yet and I need some insight if I'm to protect her."

Jerry Mattson had retreated from belligerence to thoughtfulness. He leaned back heavily in the seat and said quietly, "Well, 'course we know she hasn't been right since J. D. died. Can't blame her. We just been waiting for her to get past it is the best I can tell you. I'd seen some of the stuff you're talking about, but it didn't hang together for me like it does when you tell it. Maybe I've just been too close. And the pills. I didn't know she was on anything, let alone that somebody was cooking them."

"You know about this 'last album' of J. D.'s?"

"Sure. I figured it was fifty-fifty it would never happen. But that's up to Lisa."

"She gets the tapes from Ellen Long?"

Mattson rubbed his nose. "Not

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exactly. Ellen pulls them from the archives and gives them to Kenny Durga to run through first to make sure J. D.'s on them. No sense Lisa wasting her time."

"Who's Durga?"

"Our engineer."

"Oh. 'Rolling Tape.' " Well, well, I thought, how interesting. "Tell me about him."

"Kenny?" Mattson smiled for the first time. "He's okay. Good engineer, not exactly brilliant but then he doesn't have to be, Lisa produces us and does most of the mixing and mastering herself. What's good about Kenny is he'll stand there at the controls for hours and hours and do what he's told. And he's a good gofer, goes out for ciggies and sodas and stuff."

"That's what's good about him. What's bad about him, Jerry?"

"There's nothing *bad* about him. He plays four-chord guitar—you know, monotonous stuff over and over and over—and tries to write songs and plays them for us, and they're the God-awfullest stuff you've ever heard in your life. It's become kind of a running joke. He's a good sport, he doesn't take it personal."

"What about Rocket? He get along with her?"

Mattson's smile was ugly. "He's a pain in the ass, like a broken record. Wants us to release 'best of' albums. And solo albums by each of us individually. And big stadium dates. Exploitative stuff, unfair to the fans. If he hadn't been so close to J. D., Lisa'd have canned him long ago."

Better and better. "One more thing, and this'll sound weird."

"Shoot."

"Lisa said everyone in the group has perfect pitch."

"She told you that, huh? Well, strange, but true."

"That include Kenny Durga?"

"*Kenny?* Oh *hell,* no. No way."

Ten, eleven, then midnight passed and I opened my car windows and took off my jacket, hoping the early autumn chill would keep me awake.

It was a struggle.

The Sidewalk Commandos had worked nonstop in the studio till past eight o'clock. Then they dispersed to their homes. Lisa left, driven by one of the kiddie cops in his Toyota; I followed at a discreet distance in my feeble Granada. At her house in Dearborn Heights, he dropped her off, gave her a wave, and left her to go into the house alone. Great security.

I took up position half a block away from the house, and watched as the darkness deepened and the chill intensified. It was a quiet street with Lisa Goodnight's house the quietest of all. No change in the lights.

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No noises. Nothing to watch.

I didn't know what to watch for, but on the other hand, knowing wouldn't have made the wait any less boring.

Finally I decided I had to get out and stretch, move some blood around. I clambered out of the Granada and eyed Lisa's property. It occurred to me that, during my check of her house a couple of nights before, I'd neglected to take a close look outside. Why not now? I thought. Real thorough detective-like work, with the benefit of exercise besides. I headed off.

She had about a half acre. The back yards of the adjacent homes were fenced in; Lisa's was open except at the back, where an old chainlink fence divided her property from a dense section of woods that stretched away deep and black.

I walked along the fence on Lisa's side across the back, keeping an ear cocked for suspicious noises. Nothing.

There were a couple of sizable trees in her neatly trimmed lawn, nothing more. An unused concrete patio extended twenty feet from the back window-wall of the house. A light shone from one of the windows: the tape editing studio, I decided after mentally reviewing the internal floorplan.

I'd reached the corner of the yard and made the turn to head streetward when a light suddenly shone in my eyes and a firm male voice said, "Hey. You."

I froze, blinded. The voice came from the yard on the other side of the fence from me. It was middle-aged and not at all hesitant. I said, "Yes?"

"Who're you?" The light stayed steady in my squinting eyes.

I said, "Just checking things out back here."

"Casin' the joint, huh? That's how you guys put it."

"No. I'm a private detective, on an assignment." As I talked I heard a noise from Lisa's house, like a door slamming. I glanced that way, then back to the light. "Nice talking to you, I got to go."

"Oh no! You stay put! You're a private detective, huh? You work for Miss Goodnight?"

"Yeah." Which wasn't strictly true. Besides, how do you describe your relationship with a woman who thinks you're dead?

"Well, we'll have to be sure of that," the man said. "Us neighbors look out for each other. Hand your I.D. over here. By the way, Mr. Detective, what I'm holding in my other hand pointed at your belly button is a Ruger Security Six, three five seven maggie."

That's all I needed right now, a hopped-up neighborhood security junkie with a hand-cannon pointed at me. I was in the middle of getting my wallet out

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very slowly when I heard a car horn honk from Lisa's house. I glanced that way again and saw just the tail end of a car, parked at the curb by the driveway, motor running. What I could see of the car was yellow.

A cab. At damn near one o'clock, on the wrong side of midnight.

I flipped my I.D. toward the man and said, "Hurry up, I got to run."

"Sure, sure," he answered easily, bending to the ground and then back up. "You know, I never met a private eye before, but I read about you guys all the time. You know: Nameless, Spade, Spenser, McGee. Let's see if you're any of those guys."

"Come *on,* sir." The "sir" was a desperate afterthought, brought on by the sound of the taxi's horn honking again.

"Perkins," the man read. "Nope. You ain't any of those guys. But this looks legit enough, all right. Okay," he ended in an officious tone, "you can carry on." He tossed the I.D. back to me and headed toward his house. I sightlessly pawed the grass, found my I.D., stuffed it into my pocket, and ran around the side of Lisa's house.

To see the cab pause at the stop sign a block up, make a left, and disappear.

Grimly, I went to the front door in the wan hope that the cab had picked up someone else. The door stood ajar, I walked in. The living room was empty, there wasn't a sound in the place. I called her name twice, got only my echo back.

It seemed as if every light in the house was on as I stomped through it, searching. Everything appeared to be in place except in her bedroom, where the closet door stood open and a couple of bureau drawers jutted out with clothes draped down their fronts. In the editing studio, next door, all the equipment was turned on and humming, waiting.

I stood there, staring at it, trying to think hard and cold and clearly. Where would she go, at this miserable hour?

As I thought, I drifted over to the console. A tape was mounted on the primary hubs, and the earphones lay as if tossed across the control panel. For the hell of it, I put the headphones on, rewound the tape for a couple of seconds, and then turned the lever to PLAY.

Silence, then the snap-crackle-pop of old tape and a light hiss in the background. A male cough, the flick of a guitar pick on unchorded strings, abruptly choked off. Then chords, just the guitar, slow and easy in six-eight meter, and the voice of J. D. Fredericks—as immediately recognizable by as many people as Sinatra's—singing:

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On our anniversary, I will
come again.
Be there, be there,
Just like when we began.

He sang it just once. Then, with jarring abruptness, the tape switched to a full jam session, a screaming, raunchy cover of "Sweet Hitchhiker." I rewound the tape and played the three lines again, listening carefully. *On our anniversary, I will come again.* "Our"-anniversary. J.D.'s and Lisa's. *Just like when we began.*

Lisa had told me, "It was twenty years ago I joined J. D.," which took care of when, maybe. As for "where," all she'd said was "behind the stadium."

And, later that night, she'd also said "J. D. is alive."

It hit me then, blinding me like the neighbor's flashlight. The tapes, the drugs, Kenny Durga and his four-chord songs that brought comic relief to the Commandos; Gangemi and his collection activities for the mob, Jack Rocket and no big concerts or packages for a year. Oh, Jesus Christ.

I shut the thought away. Nineteen sixty-four, the Sidewalk Commandos' first national tour. Where did they play in Detroit? Which "stadium"? I had no idea, I wasn't a fan back then. But I knew someone who was.

I trotted to the living room, picked up the princess phone, thought for a minute, and dialed an Ann Arbor number. It answered after twenty rings. "Yes." Sleepy female voice.

"Libby. Ben. Sidewalk Commandos, 1964. Where'd they do their Detroit concert?"

It occurred to me then that I could have started the conversation better because, after a long shocked pause, she—no other word for it—screamed: "You're DEAD! It was in the PAPER! I READ it!"

I broke in roughly. "Little misunderstanding. Come on, the Commandos' concert, what about it? I'm short of time here."

Libby ignored me. "That policeman, Captain Dance, he confirmed it. Oh, Ben, I was so upset!"

I overcame the temptation to use the fingernail file line again. When material doesn't work, you drop it from the act. "See if you can get your marbles together and answer my damn question, okay, Libby?"

"What time is it?" she muttered. "Oh Jesus. You call me at one in the morning to ask a dumb question about a concert twenty years ago."

"Believe me, if I had any choice, you'd be the last person I'd call. Now come on. You were a Commandos' fan back then, before you flunked out of U of M. And I remember you went to their concert. Where was it?"

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"I didn't flunk out. I dropped out in the midst of a life-goals crisis."

"What *ever*."

She made an exasperated sigh. "It was at Olympia."

"You sure?"

"If I wasn't sure, I'd surely say, 'I'm not sure, Ben.' "

"For sure," I said sarcastically. "Thanks. Go back to bed now, and sleep well, secure in the knowledge that your brother is alive and well and on the job in Detroit." I slammed down the phone, ran out of the house without locking it, and jumped into the Granada, hoping and praying that the feeble old beast would get me there in time.

Two A.M., Lisa had said.

Olympia Stadium, the big red barn on Grand River, is a pitiful reminder of Detroit's glory days. Back before anyone conceived of Joe Louis Arena and Pontiac Silverdome and Pine Knob Amphitheatre, Olympia was a place that jumped. The Red Wings hockey team played their championship seasons there. Big bands and top acts of all kinds played their Detroit dates there.

Now, victimized by corporate money's flight to Oakland County on one hand and the riverfront on the other, Olympia is, far as I know, completely unused. It stands there on Grand River, glaring with soot-stained red brick pride over the Jeffries Freeway, the Red Wings' logo still etched defiantly in its facade, looking like a lady who's lost her husband to a younger woman but who refuses to quit wearing her wedding ring. The wrecker's ball will catch up with her one of these days, soon as it gets done finishing off the rest of downtown.

It was just past two when I eased the wheezing Granada to the curb up from the stadium. I checked my .45 in the glare of bright streetlights, then scanned the six-lane avenue. There were few cars and no people at all; even winos get a day off, it's in their contract. I got out of the car and walked toward the deserted stadium.

There was a big chainlink gate hanging open at the southwest corner along Grand River, and an alley ran back from there along the stadium into utter blackness. I remembered Lisa's saying that she met Fredericks behind the stadium after the concert. Glancing both ways for observers—there were none—I walked through the gate and down the alley.

It was clammy and rancid, real rat country. Twenty paces in, the glare of the streetlights died, cut off by the corner of the building. I got out my .45 and held it alongside me, not that I could see anything to shoot.

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I passed a row of overflowing dumpsters set at erratic angles along Olympia's walls. I tripped over a bottle and stepped in something soft. A mufflerless car roared by behind me on Grand River, and a transport plane on a low approach to Detroit City Airport screamed by overhead, momentarily killing the sound of crunching glass under my boots.

Olympia finally ended. I stopped, tucked myself against the wall at the corner, and scanned the broad, open, asphalt area behind the stadium. I think it was once a parking lot, but it was empty of cars now, dead weeds poking up through heaves and cracks in the litter-strewn pavement. Cold dark bulbs peered down from the arms of rusting iron stanchions. The only illumination came from a row of streetlights that ran along the back of the property, off in the distance.

I didn't see anybody.

Automatic held against my right thigh, I edged my face around the corner and looked along the backside of the stadium. It was broken up by a series of concrete docks that jutted out from the building, rimmed by waist-high steel guardrails, with steps running to ground level. It was almost totally lightless there, and I used all the old tricks for seeing in the dark—looked through the corners of my eyes and all that garbage—but didn't see anything, and wouldn't have, if Lisa Goodnight hadn't moved.

She stood on the second dock down, about sixty feet from me, at the guardrail. I recognized her profile, nothing more; it was too dark. Some kind of overnight bag stood on the cement at her feet. She had her hands on the rail, but her posture was not relaxed; she was erect. Waiting.

I unconsciously made a dry swallow. For a moment there I think I was tuned into the world of her thoughts, and I saw crowds, crowds of noisy, excited teenagers, a sea of them, drunk on love, intermingled with uniformed, tense Detroit policemen, waiting to give a climactic scream as the Sidewalk Commandos trotted out between rows of cops to their limousine. And, mixed in with the noise but loud and clear, I heard J. D. Fredericks' voice: *I will come again. Be there.*

I started for her, then stopped after just a step as the sound of a car motor issued from the alley behind me. It did not fade away down Grand River, it simply idled, echoing off the wall of Olympia Stadium.

Crouching, I swung around the corner. Headlights lit the alley. I was shadowed by the dumpsters. I slid along the wall and into the gap between it and

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the first dumpster. The car's motor dropped from idle into gear, and the car started to roll very slowly up the alley toward me.

I was behind the third dumpster when the car passed by, still rolling at idle speed, as if the driver wasn't sure where he was going. In the split-second available before the car passed, I saw a familiar profile behind the wheel, illuminated in bluish green by the dashboard lights. I waited between dumpsters till the car was twenty feet past me, then walked out into the alley and hoofed along in the car's wake, .45 held at a forty-five degree angle in my right hand.

As the car neared the corner of Olympia, I veered to my right, pointed my automatic, and shouted, "Hey!"

Brake lights winked twice. I saw the driver, in silhouette from the bright lights at the back of the lot, look over his right shoulder toward me. The brake lights went on and stayed on, and the driver's arm came over the top of the seat with a pistol at the end. But he did not fire. I was, intentionally, at a bad angle for him, and he didn't want to shoot through the back window of his car, even if he hadn't minded shooting through the back window of mine.

I set into position—.45 pointed straight ahead in my right hand, left hand bracing my wrist, arms extended but not locked—and shot to kill.

The boom of the heavy automatic was deafening. The slug went straight and true through the back window and exploded the side vent and driving mirror on its way out. The driver disappeared. I corrected my aim and fired again. I think I got the driver's headrest that time, which slowed down the big slug so much that, tumbling, it took out a garbage-can-sized piece of the windshield safety glass. I still couldn't see the driver. I lowered my aim for dead-center on the back of the front seat, but the brake lights went off, the car, still in gear, started to roll slowly, and the gunman's pistol flew out the side window and arced high into the darkness of the parking lot, followed by muffled screams.

Automatic still extended, I trotted after the car as we passed the corner of the building. I caught up with the driver's door as the panicky screams continued from inside. Still trotting, I popped open the door and aimed, but it didn't look as though a final shot was necessary. Track-shoed feet below bluejeaned legs dangled out the door; above them, the rest of the man sprawled across the front seat, decorated like a Christmas tree with shards of winking glass.

I grabbed him by the handi-

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est ankle and jerked him like a slot machine handle out onto the pavement. The car rolled on as I turned him over roughly, straightened, planted a foot on his chest, and stared panting into the twisted bearded face of Kenny Durga, composer of four-chord songs, engineer for the Sidewalk Commandos, Mr. "Rolling Tape."

I pointed my revolver at his right eye and slid my boot up so the heel was centered on his sternum and the toe poked into the soft area under his chin. It is a most painfully effective way to control a struggling man without using your hands. "Well, this is your lucky day, you son of a bitch! Two shots and I missed you!"

"Don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me."

I put more weight on my shoe and held the automatic so close to his eye that he could look up it like a telescope. "May have gathered, I don't like people trying to kill Lisa. I also don't like people trying to kill *me*. But you know what *really* hacks me about you?"

I heard Lisa's voice, soft and uncertain, behind me: "Ben?"

I ignored her. "You hurt my car!" I roared at Durga. "Gonna cost me a bundle! *New* rear view mirror. *New* windshield. *New* ragtop—"

Lisa, closer, repeated, "Ben?"

I kept my foot clamped down hard on Durga and turned. Lisa Goodnight stood erect and still ten feet from me, denims blackish blue in the unnatural light, leather overnight bag held in both hands against her knees. Her eyes were glassy, her face pasty and drawn. Somewhere behind me, Durga's car hit a stanchion with a solid metallic *chunk* and the motor ground and died.

Neither of us noticed. I looked at her for what seemed like a long time, then said, "What I want to do is walk over there and hug you hard. But if I let go of this son of a bitch, he might run."

She said, "I'm glad you're back."

I looked back down into Durga's eyes. "On the other hand, if I let him go and he takes off, then I'll get to run him down and stomp him into the pavement."

A siren gained on us from the distance. Durga began to gag and I lightened up a little on my foot, then released him entirely and walked to Lisa. I took her into my arms and hugged her, then glanced back at Durga. He hadn't moved.

"Easy, Leese," I told her as the siren got closer.

Her body seemed to have no substance in my arms. She disengaged herself from me, brushed some hair back from her forehead, looked around,

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and said, "Where's J. D.? He should have been here by now."

Arthur Brooks said, "So all along you figured it was Durga."

"Oh hell no. I'm not psychic. But I figured he was involved in the attempt on me at the Ypsi bar. He was outside the office at the studio when I called to arrange the meet. He was the only one who knew where I'd be."

"He *was* the shooter, though."

"Yep. Ballistics established that. Plus, he sang. Hell, he's still singing. He's doing a solo version of *Aida* down there to the Wayne County jail."

Arthur Brooks sat there, square-faced and solemn, dressed as always in an immaculate navy blue suit and white-on-white shirt. The office was silent, the phone buttons dim. "Durga must have wanted you out of the way bad."

I poked a cigar into my face and fired it up. "Yeah, him and Rocket both. My appearance threatened an act they'd had wired for months. That night behind Olympia, that was the twentieth anniversary of when Lisa met J. D., down to the minute. They primed her. Durga cooked the tapes over a period of months with 'messages' from Fredericks—really out-takes from other sessions. Durga arranged for the Placidyl substitutes in Lisa's prescriptions—he was the band's gofer, brought her her refills all the time. Kept her off-balance and flaky, led her around by the nose."

"The point of all this being?" Brooks asked politely.

"To get Lisa away somewhere, alone and late at night and helpless, where they could kill her."

Brooks shifted. "Why do it so elaborately? Why not simply kill her at home?"

"Rocket and Durga absolutely could not allow suspicion to come their way. Lisa's getting killed on her own turf would have led to the cops asking everyone associated with the group a lot of embarrassing questions. On the other hand, if she got killed behind Olympia Stadium—where, far as anyone knew, she had no business being—at two A.M., for God's sake, it would have looked like just a random street-crazy shooting. With Lisa's eccentric behavior the past year, cops'd have figured she just wandered off where she didn't belong and got nailed. Typical drug-head rock star behavior."

"I'd like to think the police would be a little more persistent than that," Brooks said.

"Hey, so would I. But let's face it."

"Yes." Brooks pressed his palms together so tightly his knuckles whitened. "Does seem

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to me that killing Lisa would be killing the golden goose for Rocket, though."

I drew hard on my cigar and blew a stream. "That's not the way he saw it at all. Lisa was an impediment to what he wanted—cash, and lots of it. Rocket wanted the group to put out solo and best-of albums. Wanted them to do big stadium dates. Lisa said no. She only wants to do original material no matter how long it takes. And she hates the big stadium dates."

"So Rocket's motive essentially was business control," Brooks agreed. "What about Durga?"

"Rocket promised Durga a performing and leadership role with the band—he's not qualified for that and never will be."

"And Durga *bought* that?"

"Sure. Rocket's essentially a salesman. He gave Durga a perfect pitch."

The lawyer leaned back in his chair, maintaining the steeple in front of his chest. "Well. I have to admit that when I hired you I had no idea something like this was going on. All things considered, I'm pleased at the outcome. You saved Lisa's life. You showed courage and resource. You did your job, Ben. Thank you."

"Appreciate the kind words," I said shortly, rising.

Arthur Brooks handed me an envelope. It was thick with, I found later, one hundred dollar bills, which I'll take in lieu of kind words any time.

"Have you been out to see Lisa yet?"

"Yeah, yesterday."

After waiting for elaboration, he said, "Stay in touch."

"Sure." I left.

Forty minutes later, as early autumn darkness closed in, I walked into Under New Management, my habitual drinking hangout on Ecorse Road near the I-275 interchange. The guys were all there, as arranged, and they jumped to their feet and whooped and shook my hand and pounded my back as I entered. We took the big table in the center of the saloon, Eddie brought us pitchers and shots, and we got going on the evening's mission: to get roaring drunk.

But try as I might, the booze and good times didn't bring on enough oblivion to erase the memory of my visit to Lisa Goodnight the day before.

She was staying at a small, unpublicized, extremely expensive sanitarium in the pastoral setting of South Lyon, Michigan. Her doctor had determined that she'd become dependent on Placidyl, and you don't back off that without a lot of help; so she committed herself to the sani-

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tarium to take care of that and to restore her precarious biochemical balance. In addition, I was told the headshrinkers there wanted to help her recover from her state of mourning over the death of J. D. Fredericks. I didn't doubt they could unscramble her chemistry, but I had serious doubts about their ability to help her recover from Fredericks. I'm uneducated, but I know that you don't ever get over the death of someone close to you. Rather, you change your thinking and closet the pain away somewhere, where it waits to jump out at you in an unguarded moment.

We spoke briefly in the sanitarium's library. She wasn't unfriendly, but she was quiet, prim, distant. She thanked me for helping her and promised to let me know about the band's next unpublicized bar gig (she never did), and to send me a copy of her latest single, "Kiss of Death." She never did that either, but that's okay, it's been on the radio a lot lately.

I left there reasonably confident that she'd come through okay. Lisa Goodnight is keeping a delicate balance between sanity and insanity, dragged hard on the one hand by the cloudy, limitless world of creativity and, on the other hand, by the real world, a world of cruelty and greed. Freed of drugs and master of her grief, she has a shot at maintaining that delicate balance, preserving her sanity, bringing the beauty of great music to the world, and, just possibly, getting some happiness for herself.

The only insoluble problem was not hers, it was mine. She did not love me any more.

As the boys and I drank and sang obscene lyrics to the C&W pounding out of the juke, I thought, hell! I've been in this business a long time. I've learned that clients are a lot like your family. You love them, you go to the mat for them, but smart money says they'll turn right around and break your heart.

I looked around at the faces of the guys—Rockecharlie, Moscone, Johnston, Scozzafava, Rader, Putnam, and one more silent face, staring up at us from the center of the table: Ben Franklin. I thought, well, like Daddy always said, you can't pick your family, but you can pick your friends. And these were good ones. I knew they'd stay with me. Hell, I was buying.

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UNSOLVED

by C. R. Wylie, Jr.

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the August issue.

A recent murder case centered around the six men, Clayton, Forbes, Graham, Holgate, McFee, and Warren. In one order or another these men were the victim, the murderer, the witness, the policeman, the judge, and the hangman. The facts of the case were simple. The victim had died instantly from the effect of a gunshot wound inflicted at close range. The witness did not see the crime committed, but swore to hearing an altercation followed by a shot. After a lengthy trial the murderer was convicted, sentenced to death, and hanged.

McFee knew both the victim and the murderer.

In court the judge asked Clayton to give his account of the shooting.

Warren was the last of the six to see Forbes alive.

The policeman testified that he picked up Graham near the place where the body was found.

Holgate and Warren never met.

What role did each man play in this unfortunate melodrama?

See page 136 for the solution to the June puzzle.

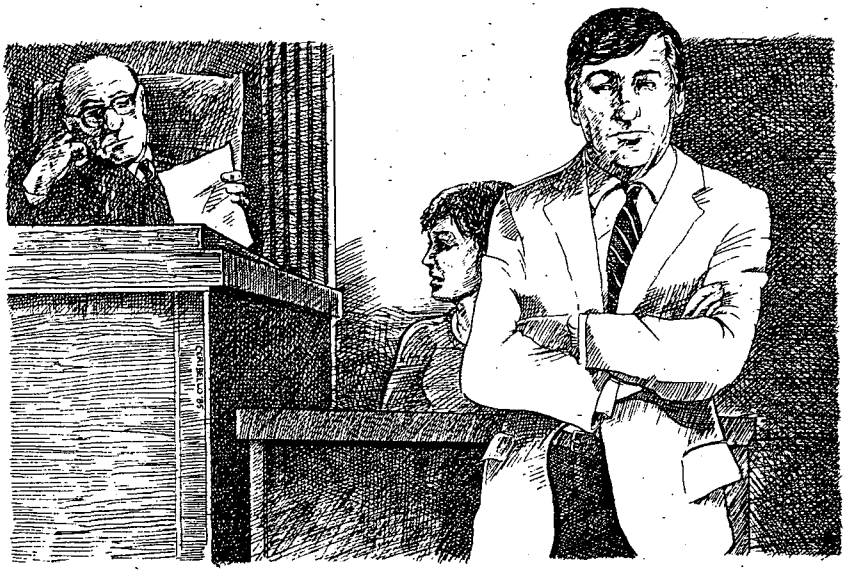
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FICTION

Accidentally Yours

by Ellane Caveney



As a lawyer in the rural community of Cram Corners, my caseload is rather sparse. Not that I'm complaining, since that leaves me lots of time for what I like best—hobby farming. I own forty acres just seven miles outside of town. We raise chickens, even though my wife claims they're dirty. (She's a city girl. I met Claire in college and brought her back to my hometown. After eleven years, she claims she's still adjusting.) We had goats for a while until I discovered that they ate expensive shrubbery, not grass, and that the milk tasted strange even when it was made into custard. I bought our three kids a Welsh pony and have since acquired an antique cart to ride in. I'm looking for a sleigh in good condition at a reasonable price. (Yes, I realize those terms are contradictory.) We have two feeder pigs appropriately named Breakfast and Lunch. But the huge hogs are going on six years of

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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age because we bought them when they were adorable little piglets and proceeded to treat them as family pets. To this day, they follow our youngest son around like devoted puppies. Let me forewarn those who dream of a rural life: tenderhearted people shouldn't try raising their own meat, it's too expensive. I'm sure these Cheshire Whites are going to die of old age before we ever taste home-cured bacon. But then I have digressed from my subject, the most exciting, if regrettable, case I have defended to date.

First, let me introduce Janie Shannon. She grew up in Cram Corners. She was a few years behind me in school, but I knew her sister Anna. Janie was the quiet type, so quiet that I never really took note of her appearance until she became my client. I suppose she must be about twenty-five. She has short, curly brown hair and a flawless complexion. I can't tell you the color of her eyes for certain because she never looks anybody right in the face. After high school, she took a job behind the counter at Clarence's Drug. Most people say that Clarence hired her out of kindness. In other words, when the good Lord dealt, He gave Janie the cards missing from a pinochle deck. Since I'd only met her over the lunch counter at Clarence's, where she kept her eyes on the order pad and mumbled, I'd come to the conclusion that she didn't have anything higher than a seven or eight in the smarts department. Anyway, everybody felt sorry for Janie when she was arrested for manslaughter, and I was asked to take the case with local donations for my fee. It wasn't like my docket was overloaded at the time (my only case being the McCallisters' divorce) so I accepted.

I'll never forget how dejected Janie looked at our first conference. She had been arrested for killing Peter Krushyn but was out on bail (also raised by the good citizens of Cram Corners). It seems that Janie struck Peter with her '76 Chevy sedan when he was on his way back to the grocery store he and his brother Paul owned. He'd just bought two hamburgers, one order of fries and one of onion rings, plus two coffees. Their lunches were much messier than Peter, who had a bruise on one thigh and a bump on his head. Nonetheless, he was very dead. But let me get back to Janie and her version of the accident.

"I rarely leave work before closing time," she whispered, so low that I had to ask her to speak up. "I'd promised Mother that I would take her books back to the library during my lunch hour. A simple little errand, that's all." She heaved her thin shoulders. "I was driving slowly. I've never had a speeding ticket. At least, I think I was driving slowly. I . . . I guess I was daydreaming when Mr.

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Krushyn walked right in front of me." She was shredding her hanky. Not a tissue, but a regular hanky, the kind my grandmother used to tuck into her bodice. Rip. Rip. Rip. Most unnerving. "I got so flustered. I tried to slam on the brake, but must have hit the gas pedal instead. I really don't know. I don't remember. All I do remember was this terrible thud."

"Just relax, dear." I patted her hand and felt her tense even more. "We all make mistakes."

"But I make more than most," she murmured. "Even though I tally everything twice, my customers are always having to correct me."

"I'm sure you make the errors in the customers' favor," I tried to console her.

"Oh, no! Please don't say such a thing in front of Clarence. I do try to be so careful."

"I'm sure you do, dear."

"Are they going to give me the electric chair?" Her hanky now lay in shreds on her lap and she began wrapping the strips around her fingers.

"Mercy, no, Janie! I'm sure Judge Croft will be most understanding."

"Sweet Judge Croft. Did you know he and my daddy graduated together? From high school, I mean. Of course the judge went on and became important, and my daddy just went to work for the road commission. Oh, I have humiliated my family. Disgraced them! I killed a man. I really did. I can't believe it. I just can't believe it!"

"Don't take on so, Janie. I promise you everything will turn out all right."

"I don't see how." And she wept into the wadded fragments of her hanky. I handed her my monogrammed handkerchief, which she twisted and cried into and gave back in threads half an hour later.

I had no choice but to have Jane Shannon plead guilty to involuntary manslaughter, requesting leniency. The whole town showed up at the courthouse the morning of the hearing. Everyone's sympathy, quite naturally, was with poor, obscure Janie.

On the witness stand the girl told, tearfully, how she hadn't meant to step on the accelerator. Matt Corkran, our dayshift policeman, testified to the presence of skidmarks for the last six feet before impact. Character witnesses described how polite Janie was, how she always tried to give the correct change, and how she

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apologized profusely when she got the orders mixed up. Then Paul Krushyn took the stand.

"My brother crossed at that intersection 'most every day at noon," the fiftyish grocer stated. "We'd been ordering our lunch from the Dairy Barn since Pa ran the store. It was such a habit, and there was so little traffic on Route 17, that I reckon Peter wasn't watchin' when he stepped onta the pavement. 'Tweren't nobody's fault. Coulda been me in the road jest as easy, since we trade off who goes. Depends on who's busiest when lunchtime comes 'round. That day I'd been stacking soup so Peter went. Just his dumb luck. Miss Janie isn't to blame."

The packed courtroom nodded agreement.

The judge gave Janie a suspended sentence. I'm sure his conscience would not have permitted anything else. The whole town cheered, and the local weekly newspaper carried an editorial on the victory of justice in our great land.

Needless to say, I was a little surprised to see Janie in my office late one afternoon about a month after the hearing. Janie simply didn't visit people. Not even to thank them. She was too shy.

"Mr. Hodge," she began, taking a ladder-backed chair opposite my desk. "I just had to come and see you." I handed her a box of Kleenex and watched as she demolished them one by one in her nervousness. "I'm carrying a terrible burden and I must confess."

"To killing Mr. Krushyn on purpose?" I teased.

The girl raised her eyes, but the November shadows were long in my office and I still couldn't determine their color. A vague fear crawled up my back and sat on my shoulder.

"I can't live with myself," she whispered, "having lied to you. I mean, while I wouldn't want anyone else to know . . ."

"Have you spoken to your minister?" I asked, not wanting any share of the guilt I could feel emanating from Janie. This girl guilty? Impossible!

"I can't bring myself to tell Reverend Tolliver. You see, he's a second cousin on my mother's side."

"Janie, I really don't think I want to hear this."

"Yes, you do." She chewed her bottom lip for several seconds. "If I get up and leave right now, you would always wonder what really happened, wouldn't you?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my swivel chair.

"You can't be tried twice for the same crime," I advised her, "so you don't have to confess to *me*." Boy, did I emphasize that last word!

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"I know." She made confetti of yet another Kleenex. "And I knew that I would never be convicted of manslaughter in this town. Mr. Krushyn knew it, too. I guess that's why he gave me five thousand dollars to run over his brother with my car."

"Oh, Lord!" I broke out in a sweat where I didn't even have pores.

"The brothers were having a difference of opinion about running their store." Janie took the last Kleenex out of the box. "One wanted to sell and move out of Cram Corners. The other didn't."

"I heard Paul had put the store on the market," I admitted, already savoring a warrant for his arrest. "Pray tell me," I had to ask, "why you would even consider . . ." but the word "murder" got stuck in my throat.

"Five thousand dollars is a lot of money. I wanted to take a cruise. You know, like on the Love Boat."

"Love Boat?" I repeated dazedly.

"Um-hmmm. I don't make much money at the drugstore. I've been saving for years and still have only three hundred and thirteen dollars in my account."

"I can't believe it. Janie Shannon capable of premeditated murder. I would never have imagined it possible. . . . Good grief, girl, you can't even get two orders straight."

"Well," Janie swallowed, hard. "I didn't exactly get it straight. That's why I put on my brakes in the end. But it was too late." Janie shook her head sadly. "Peter's the one who offered me the five thousand dollars. Fortunately, he paid in advance. And now, you and I are the only two who know the truth." She smiled. "I do feel so much better for having told you."

How nice, I thought, though I wasn't feeling very well myself. Sure, I was glad Janie had been handed a couple of aces from the Almighty's deck and that conniving Peter Krushyn had been left with a joker. But the McCallisters had reconciled and I was living off my farming income. Oh, I was asked to represent a drifter who had been caught with some gems from the late Maggie Hofster's estate. But the way things had been going for me lately, the drifter would turn out to be Maggie's long-lost son who was only claiming his rightful inheritance.

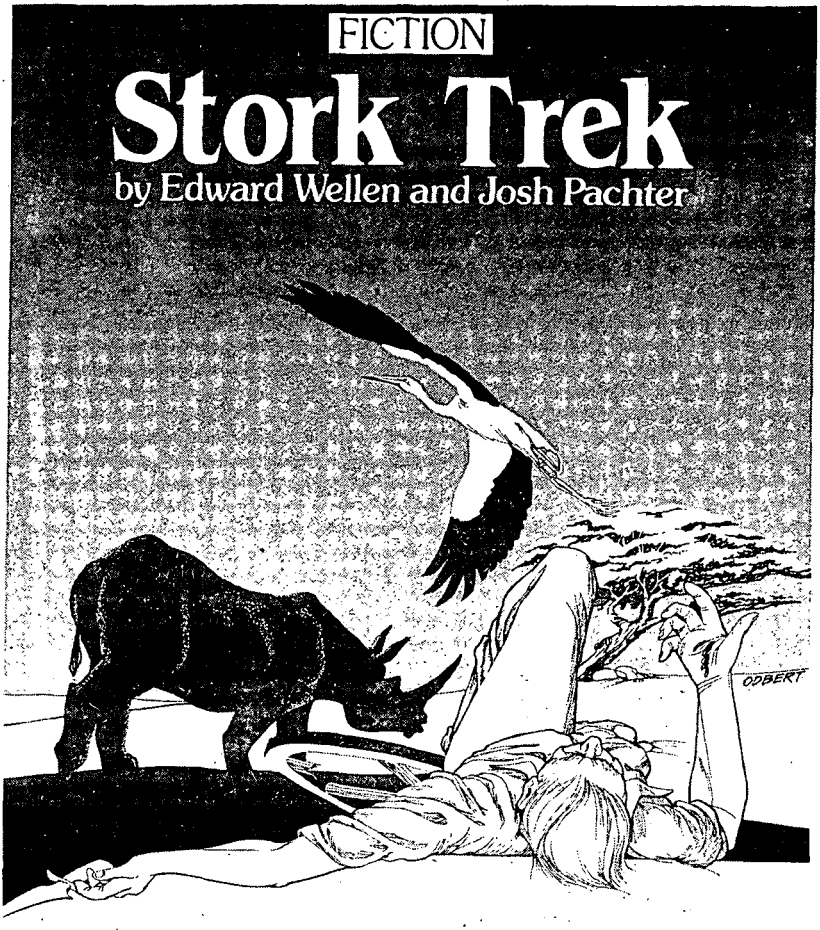
Nope, I simply don't have faith in people any more. Not that I should trust animals, either. My left arm is in a cast following a spill from the pony cart and the chicken eggs we hatched so carefully in a hundred-and-fifty-dollar brooder all grew up to be roosters. Guess the Lord knew they'd be safe in our now-vegetarian household.

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FICTION

Stork Trek

by Edward Wellen and Josh Pachter



It was not especially chilly, not yet, but somehow the big white bird knew it was time to begin its annual journey to the south. It did not know that fact in the way we humans know of knowing, but deep within its genes and chromosomes, coursing irresistibly through the microscopic labyrinth of its nervous system, leaping forward across the millions of synapses in its way, a demanding chorus of ancient voices cried: *Now!*

Old Annie Dekkers bobbed to and fro in a tired old rocking chair which had itself been old when she was still a girl. Then, suddenly, the sky outside her window exploded in a brilliant blur of sun-sparkled wings as the graceful bird soared up and away from the wagon-wheel nest that crowned her unused chimney. A youthful

Illustration by Jim Odbert

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smile danced across her dry, cracked lips. How lovely to see the creature in flight again! She did not sorrow to see it go. It would be back, she knew, in the spring. It came back every spring, had done so for a dozen years and its father and mother before it. Where did it go, she wondered, when it left the quiet comfort of her farm? South was the only answer she could feel sure of. South. She frowned, now, troubled at last. The bird would be back in the spring, yes, that much was certain. But this next time, this next spring, when the bird returned, would *she* be there to greet it?

The farmhouse dwindled and disappeared below, as powerful wingbeats carried the white bird aloft. As always, the first hours of its journey were pleasant, peaceful. Only later, far away, when the storms began, would the trip become a struggle.

A great city appeared in the distance, drew closer, a place of tall buildings and much noise and filthy air. There was, though, a tranquil oasis of leafy trees and rippling waters in the heart of this city, a spot forgotten by time and civilization, where monkeys chattered in a jungle-like environment and polar bears paced back and forth to the delight of small children. It offered an inviting foretaste of the serenity that awaited at journey's end, and had it been a few hours later, the bird might well have stopped there to pass the night. But it was still broad daylight and the bird felt vibrantly alive. It was enjoying the whisper of wind that ruffled its pinfeathers as it thrust strongly against the thermal air currents that helped it in its gliding flight, and so it kept eagerly on.

As it passed, a second bird—almost identical to the first, except for the angular black stain on its forehead—rose up from the oasis to join it. Though nothing we humans would call messages or symbols was exchanged, an unspoken thought was in the air between them: how good to have company to fly beside on the long and often lonely pilgrimage to the south! Below and behind them, a tall man in a severe black suit stood next to the squat brick building atop which the second bird maintained its nest, a thin hand shading his eyes as he watched them recede from view. The man was smiling, like the old woman at the farmhouse, but this smile was filled with evil and with greed.

On an empty street at the southern edge of the city, a younger man with unkempt long hair and a small gold earring affixed to his left earlobe felt something soft and liquid drop onto the shoulder of his badly weathered black leather jacket. His mind was elsewhere, and he moved to brush off the mess without thinking. At the feel of it, though, he jerked his hand away in horror. *"Getver-*

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demme!" he swore and, looking up, shook his fist in futile anger at the two large birdshapes that, silhouetted against the autumn sunshine, winged purposefully southward towards the distant horizon.

"The stork is underway," said Gerard Valkenier, brushing crumbs from the legs of his black trousers and rising to greet the lanky South African who had just appeared in the doorway of his office in the squat brick Bird House at Artis, the Amsterdam zoo. "It took off about an hour ago. I watched it go, and then I came back here and called you at your hotel."

"So it's begun, then," said Kuypers, pronouncing the Dutch words slowly and with a distinct Afrikaans accent.

"Yes," Valkenier nodded, "it's begun."

The two men sat in facing armchairs, and Valkenier helped himself to another *negerzoen* from the bag he had picked up that morning from the bakery across from the main gate. "It ought to reach the Kruger Wildtuin in about three weeks," he said, "and it will winter there until sometime around the middle of March. So now it's your move. When you're back in Johannesburg and you've acquired the diamonds, all you need to do is pack them in the capsule and attach it to the bird's leg, just as I've already shown you. The stork will do the rest of the work. If past performance is any guide, it should return here by the beginning of the second week in April."

"With no borders, no customs, and no export or import duties to worry about. I like it, I like it very much. There's only one thing I *don't* like. What if there are *fifty* of those damned white birds hanging around the preserve when I get there? How will I know which is the one that summers up there on your roof?"

"I've explained that already," Valkenier said patiently, "the first time we met." He popped another candy into his mouth and chewed it noisily. "I painted a small mark on our bird's forehead, with indelible black, a V for Valkenier. With a decent pair of binoculars, you'll be able to spot it from a hundred meters off."

Kuypers grinned. "That's right," he remembered. "That's good." He reached for the bag of sweets, hungry at last, but he was too late. His partner was swallowing the last of them, and licking his lips with a darting motion of his sharp pink tongue.

Dirk Kuypers flushed the toilet and washed his rough hands

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thoroughly. A metal plaque next to the aluminum basin said, "For the convenience of the passengers who will follow you, please wipe out the sink with your used paper towel before disposal," but he ignored it and returned to his seat, leaving the basin full of scummy water.

The stewardess was just coming around with her wheeled trolley, and he ordered himself a miniature bottle of jenever and drank it neat from the flimsy plastic cup the woman gave him.

What a caper, he thought, as he had thought so often this last week in Amsterdam. What a delicious and foolproof scheme!

They were ten thousand meters above the Mediterranean, just south of Gibraltar and arrowing straight for the looming bulk of Africa at a little less than six hundred kilometers per hour.

On the underbelly of the aircraft, a hatch door swung open on hinges that had been oiled much too assiduously by a mechanic at Schiphol Airport who had his mind on his girlfriend, and Kuypers' waste fell through. It froze almost immediately in the sub-zero temperatures at that altitude, and looked strangely attractive as it built up speed, a ragged block of greenish ice flecked interestingly with shiny black droplets of still-liquid oil from the hatch door.

By the time it had dropped to only five hundred meters, the block of ice was traveling at terminal velocity; scant seconds before plunging into the emerald waters of the sea and melting away to nothingness, it struck and killed a white stork who had not even been aware of its approach.

A second stork survived uninjured. Several drops of oil splattered wildly at the projectile's impact with its companion, though, leaving a curiously V-shaped marking on the snowy white background of the remaining bird's forehead.

The creature did not understand the tragedy of the death it had just witnessed—not, in any case, as we humans understand tragedy—but at some deep level of its awareness it mourned at the prospect of continuing its long journey alone.

The knife thrust took the miner completely by surprise. His cry of anguish was lost in the empty vastness of the veldt, and the expression of horrified betrayal that spread across his coal-black face even faster than the warm crimson blood-stain soaked the white cotton shirtfront at his belly was seen by no one but his assassin.

Dirk Kuypers wiped his blade clean on the stiff brown grass, and returned it to the sheath that hung from his belt. The leather pouch

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of uncut diamonds for which he had just committed murder went into his rucksack, along with his bug spray and his cigarettes and his packet of cheese sandwiches.

He headed back towards the waterhole where he had left his jeep without another glance at the body, kicking his way through the scrubby tangle of karroo bushes and zigzagging to avoid the dangerous *kopjes* that were bright-red anthills. His sharply defined shadow marched on before him.

One might make a haiku of that, he thought, and turned soft images around in his head as he walked:

> We travel by twos
> Till the final darkness falls,
> My shadow and I.

A good one, that. He would try it out tonight, when he was back in the city with his mates around him and the lager flowing freely.

In Amsterdam, Gerard Valkenier took a huge bite of his chocolate *moorkop,* and sighed contentedly as the sweet whipped cream caressed his tastebuds.

He wiped his mouth carefully with a paper napkin, then picked up a red felt-tipped pen and marked an X through that day's date on the wall calendar that hung behind his desk. It was the eighteenth red X he had drawn, beginning just after the South African had left his office the afternoon the bird had taken flight.

Any day now, he told himself dreamily, as he reached for another bite of his pastry. Any day.

Kuypers sleeved his face and tasted the salt sweat on the edge of his tongue. He rubbed his stinging eyes, then for the nth time scanned the desolate landscape of the Kruger Wildtuin with his binoculars. Whichever way he looked the veldt stretched out in dry distances to drown his presence and dwindle all creatures to the size of ants.

Where *is* the damn bird? he asked himself. Every day for a week now he'd been sneaking over the chainlink fence that bordered the wildlife preserve, and some internal pressure gauge told him he was beginning to push his luck. If the keepers didn't catch him, and lock him up for trespassing, the lions would surely get him sooner or later.

The rhinos did not worry him so much. Though the rhino has

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brute strength to match its nasty temper, it is dim of sight and even dimmer of wit. If it misses on its first charge, it does not think to turn and try again; it plunges on until it runs out of steam, and then it stops. All Kuypers would have to do if a rhino should threaten him was step out of its path at the right moment, and that would be that. The lions, on the other hand, were a different matter. . . .

Enough of this train of thought. Kuypers shook his head to clear the stuffy cobwebs from his brain. Concentrate on the stork. It will come.

That long Dutch drink of water certainly seemed to know his business: there were, indeed, storks arriving, and just where Valkenier had told him he would find them. This had to be the birds' ancestral home. Prehistoric men had scratched their artwork deep into the surface of a nearby stone, so that one could still make out—despite time's cruel eraser—faint birdshapes gliding fluidly across the stone. Some things never changed. Or, at least, there were long-lasting patterns of built-in behavior which—

A streak of shadow smoothly coursing the rough ground made him lift his gaze to the sky. False hope: only another cursed vulture on the lookout for game—or, rather, for gaminess.

The bloodshot sun's slow metronome had swung towards dusk; soon all the sky's day-flying storks would land to spend the night, however short of journey's end they might be. If Valkenier's bird didn't show up soon, Kuypers might as well call it quits for the day and come back again tomorrow.

At that moment, as if it were a piece torn from an earlier hour, a sudden whiteness floated down into this darker time. Kuypers spotted it coming in, a large white stork, and as it landed he moved closer to bring it within range of his fieldglasses. He adjusted the fine focus and—yes, the black spot was there on its forehead, a bit faded but definitely visible in the dying light of the afternoon!

He hummed softly to himself as he broke out the tin of dried locusts and grasshoppers he had brought along for the purpose of luring the bird within reach. Slowly he crept towards it, sowing the insect-bait between himself and the stork with carefully small movements of his arm. Valkenier had tamed, if not domesticated, the creature, so Kuypers' manshape should not frighten it off, if all went well.

The bird did not flap away, but neither did it approach at once the tasty morsels leading back to the manshape. Perhaps it had suffered some mishap in its long and arduous passage, some bat-

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tering or buffeting that had made it extra-cautious. Certainly it *looked* weary, its proud stance giving way to the heavy pull of the earth.

Then hunger gave it strength, and with delicate gluttony it snapped up the trail of insects, following it back to Kuypers till at last it was eating out of his palm.

In an instant he had it, grasped the weakly struggling creature in his firm yet gentle hands. Careful, careful. All he needed to do was snap a leg or break a wing, and the game was lost.

Using his back and hunched shoulders to shield his face from beak and wing, he banded the metal capsule to one leg as Valkenier had taught him. Engraved into the metal in tiny print were the words: PROPERTY OF NETHERLANDS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY. IF FOUND, PLEASE RETURN WITH SEAL UNBROKEN TO N.O.S., BOX 4234, AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS, FOR CASH REWARD. This way, if anything should happen to the bird on its way back to Holland, there was still a chance that the diamonds would go through.

The Netherlands Ornithological Society, indeed! How did Valkenier think these things up? The man was a genius!

There. With the capsule attached, Kuypers' part of the job was finished. Now it was up to the bird. He threw it a Churchillian V to match the crude marking on its forehead, then turned away, stepping accidentally between the spokes of an old wagon wheel baked into the soil. Some fallen-by-the-wayside relic of the Great Trek of the Boers, the wheel. Its trail reached back through time to the days when the pioneers had yoked up their oxen and driven them across the veldt. And here it had lain in wait for him, all those years, to catch his foot where two of its spokes met the hub and twist his ankle viciously.

Kuypers swore: his foot was jammed solidly in the narrow angle of the spokes. It seemed easier to pull a spoke loose than to work his hurting foot free, and the brittle old wood gave way with a screech like the protesting hinges of a long-rusted gate.

No, it was not the wood that screamed after all. It was Kuypers himself, screaming in pain as his balance shifted and his foot slid farther beneath the remaining spoke and took his full weight.

Gasping for breath, his ankle afire with agony, he dimly realized that the loosened spoke still hung loosely in his hand. He flung it angrily back over his left shoulder, and heard a dull *whump* as it connected with some object behind him. Then came an irritated snort from the same direction, and Kuypers turned his head at the sound.

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There was a rhino not ten meters away from him, its head down, its foreleg clawing at the ground. His unguided missile had hit it and offended its primitive sense of dignity. Though the beast's sight was poor, it had gotten a fix on him by smell, and suddenly it was charging.

Kuypers struggled frantically to pull his trapped foot free. He succeeded at cost of shattering pain, but not in time to hobble out of the rhino's path. Nor was there time for him to draw his knife, for all the good that would have done him: the beast's leathery hide would have turned the blade aside harmlessly.

The horn caught him in the very spot where he had stabbed the black miner when stealing the diamonds, but the sudden pain of the wound was so intense that the irony of it escaped him.

Tossed high, he landed back on the wheel as the rhino pounded on into the distance and dissolved in a cloud of its own dust. He lay there in the empty veldt, bleeding his wasted life away, as the stork with the metal capsule on its leg looked on, its long reddish beak parted slightly in what a fanciful observer might have taken for an expression of sympathy.

A faint cry bubbled from Kuypers' lips, like the sorrowing wail of a bagpipe's final notes. The stork, curious now, approached the broken manshape nesting on the half-buried wagon wheel. It rubbed its forehead almost tenderly across the South African's palm, as if absolving him from the sin of having mistreated it. Its touch brought Kuypers back briefly from the business of passing on into the one great shadow, and he turned his head painfully to gaze at the innocent creature. Through tear-filled eyes he noticed that the black mark on its forehead was no longer shaped like a V; it was smeared now, and formless. He forced his weakening neck muscles to bend, and saw that his palm was stained with oil.

It was the wrong bird, he realized, the wrong damn bird!

High overhead, a trio of hungry vultures circled patiently, maintaining their vigilant holding pattern, waiting for the figure sprawled out beneath them to stop its thrashing about so they could settle down to their dinner. . . .

After a long and bitter winter—a winter so unusually cold that, for the first time in years, there were iceskaters on her canals—spring came at last to the city of Amsterdam.

In thousands of window boxes crocuses and narcissi and the inevitable tulips bloomed; in thousands of back gardens, pear trees pushed forth their first tentative blossoms. A flotilla of glass-

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enclosed tour boats replaced the skaters on the vast network of intersecting canals; recorded voices described the sights in Dutch, English, French, and German as the tourists breathed patterns of mist on the glass walls and snapped pictures of the Skinny Bridge and the narrowest house in Holland and the stately gables along the Herrengracht. In the Leidseplein, the skating rink was disassembled and trucked away to a warehouse for storage, and in its place a hundred white tables sprang up like mushrooms, surrounded by rings of metal chairs and crowned by gay red and white Campari umbrellas; white-jacketed waiters bustled about with frantic energy, serving coffee and beer to a population that seemed to have just awakened from a five-month hibernation.

There was rain, of course, and an occasional promising glimpse of the sun. There were bicycles everywhere, and street musicians crawled up from the shelter of the Metro stations to fill the air with song. In the Vondel Park, dogs ran free and Frisbees flew and white lines of smoke wafted lazily from the bowls of pipes packed with shag tobacco or Lebanese hashish or some hopeful mixture of the two.

Indoors there were meetings, many meetings, as the anti-nuclear groups and squatters and homosexuals and punks and feminists broke out their signboards and paints and brushes and began their preparations for the long round of protest marches that lay ahead of them all.

On the roof of a tall white building not far beyond the city limits, a gull sat proudly on its spacious nest of grass and reeds and feathers. There were four speckled eggs beneath it, and soon those eggs would hatch. Then there would be hungry mouths to feed, hungry bellies to fill.

To the gull, it was simply a time for babies. But to the city of Amsterdam nearby and the flat Dutch countryside all around, it was spring.

Gerard Valkenier caught himself licking his fingers automatically, and felt shock at the realization of what he had let go to waste by his lack of attention at the critical moments. A fine state of affairs, a sad commentary on the state of his mind, when a connoisseur of his standing missed out on the delights of a freshly prepared *Tompoes!* He tried to summon up the delicate flavors that his senses must at least subliminally have registered, but their traces were already too faint. There was your true ghost at the banquet—the failure to engage to the full

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one's tastebuds, one's olfactory mucous membrane, one's retinal cells. What a waste! And another day wasted, too. His window showed him evening making ready to settle across the city.

Time flies, he thought. Time flies, but does my stork?

There had been no word from Kuypers the entire winter, no word at all, and Valkenier feared that something must have gone terribly wrong with his plan. Day after day, while the pile of progress reports and purchase requests and invoices demanding his attention grew higher and higher on his desk as if to chart his mounting anxiety, he had sat in his lonely office just like this, searching the framed oblong of sky beyond his window for the flash of white that would be his stork returning at last from the south.

What could have gone wrong? Had Kuypers failed to obtain the diamonds? Had he been caught trespassing in the game preserve? Neither explanation answered the questions raised by the bird's continued absence. Well, then, what else? Had the damned South African injured the stork while trying to attach the capsule to its leg? Or had the bird fallen prey to the Wildtuin's predatory teeth and claws? Or had some unexpected other disaster befallen it on either leg of its long and arduous journey?

Valkenier clenched his fists, a thousand catastrophes tearing tortuously at his mind.

He was completely helpless. All he could do was sit here and wait, try to convince himself that the bird would arrive tomorrow, get up and go home to another sleepless night after first stopping in at the post office, just in case the capsule of diamonds had come to roost in the box he had rented in the name of the mythical Netherlands Ornithological Society.

And, of course, pay a call on the *bakkerij* across from the gate as he left, to replenish his dwindling supply of sugary treats. They were, these days, his only remaining pleasure—and now even *that* small comfort was being denied him!

Savagely, Valkenier tore the topmost leaf from the calendar pad on his desk. Time flies, he thought again, then chuckled mirthlessly and stopped himself from crumpling the sheet and tossing it angrily into his wastebasket. Instead, he folded it into a paper airplane and sailed the flimsy craft across the room. Time flies, he thought with a bitter smile as the airplane flew through the open window and a fit of wind caught it and swept it high over the zoo.

Playful air currents teased the plane through a long series of climbs and dives. It was several minutes before it ran out of fuel and crash-landed into the riotous purple of a rhododendron in full

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bloom; on its final approach, its jet-black shadow swooped hawklike across the wire mesh of a dovecote, startling the birds into a confused flutter of terror.

Annie Dekkers lay helplessly in her great brass bed, her withered hands clasping fitfully at the thick down quilt that held her prisoner. She had sewn the quilt herself, every stitch, in the fall of the year she had married poor Fokke, but now the rheumatism had left her so weak that she could not even manage to move it aside and swing her thin legs over the side of the bed and grope her way downstairs to fix herself the cup of tea she craved so badly.

It must be close to three by now, and Lien would be back from the shop at half past five. Dear Lien. A sweet and wonderful daughter, a true comfort to old Annie in these tiring, tiring times. How Lien had failed so dismally with her own child, that horrible grandson of hers, that Roel, was a mystery Annie had never been able to solve.

But it was Lien who lived with her and cared for her, not Roel, *dank zij God,* and she could wait for her tea until her daughter's return. There, it was already three, the bell from the church tower in the village sounded loudly through the window of her bedroom, the window dear Lien had so thoughtfully opened for her that morning before she left, so she could breathe the lovely spring air and watch the birds as they decorated the sky with the confident brushstrokes of their passing.

Perhaps today her beloved stork would come back to her. Perhaps today it would—

As if by magic, the lines engraved on Annie Dekkers' tired face disappeared, dissolved into a suffusion of joy that transformed her from a dying old woman to the happiest of farm girls.

Outside her window, the great white bird approached. She followed its flight with glistening eyes as it drew closer and closer, larger and thrillingly larger. She held her breath in an ecstasy of terror as it glided out of sight at the top edge of the window, until at last she heard the familiar rustling sounds of the bird settling back down onto its nest atop her chimney, the old wagon wheel poor Fokke had set there the year before he died.

"You've come back," she sighed contentedly, Fokke and Lien and her tea at once forgotten, her voice the coo of a child at play. "You've come back!"

The pimply hoodlum in the worn leather jacket absently fingered

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the small gold hoop depending from his left earlobe and gazed out the window of the bus at the cows grazing in the meadows that stretched off into hazy distances on either side of the road. The sun was shining, which made him think of the pier at Scheveningen and the luscious German *mädchens* who were out there panting with hunger for a hot young *kerel* with his kind of style. But that whole scene cost money and plenty of it, while he'd shelled out practically his last *stuiver* for a seat aboard this crummy yellow bus. Hell, he didn't have enough *poen* left over for *one* admission to the pier, forget about the funds required to entertain a delightful young *fraülein* or maybe even twins, the way he dreamed.

He turned away from the window with a scowl, and wrapped himself tightly in the awful unfairness of his life.

All the damned *gastarbeiters* had to do was stand in line at the GAK for an hour a week in order to lie to a bored civil servant about how diligently they were out there searching for work, and the government would shower enough WW on them to keep them and their lousy twenty-seven-children families in pisang goreng or whatever it was they ate for the rest of their lives. Surinamers, Moroccans, Turks, Moluccans—the *regiering* looked after them all without a squawk. But here he was, Holland-born and Holland-bred, and if *he* should dare to show his face around the GAK office he'd have a dozen filthy *smerissen* crawling all over him and no mistake. And it wasn't even fair! All he'd meant to do was *startle* that old fool at the tram stop, just a joke, give the guy a quick scare and have himself a couple of laughs. It wasn't *his* fault the *ouwe oelewapper* had panicked and jumped right into the path of an oncoming streetcar. They couldn't possibly blame that on *him*—and yet of course they would, the bastards. He was lucky he'd had the common sense to take off as soon as he saw the old man go down.

The bus rumbled heavily to a stop—*his* stop, he realized at the last possible moment—and the rubber bumpers on the rear door sucked at his arm as he squeezed past them.

He was in no mood for a half-hour trudge down the muddy country roads that led from the village center out to Oma's, but he didn't have much of a choice. There was no other bus he could take, he didn't have money for a cab, and no one was likely to pay any attention to his thumb, not in *this* dimwitted backwater, not with his shoulder-length hair and his one gold earring and his scruffy tough-guy clothes. Muttering angrily, his tight black boots already pinching his toes, he set off for Oma's.

The old bitch had never liked him, he knew, not since he was a

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kid and he used to sling pebbles at that creepy bird of hers at every opportunity. The last year or so before he'd finally chucked the small-town life and run off to live in the city, that was the only reason he'd allowed his nag of a mother to drag him out there for a visit—so he could lob rocks at Oma Annie's darling *ooievaartje,* perched up there on the roof as if it owned the damn house. It made him sick to think that he had crawled out here today to beg her for help—him, Roel Olpers, with his tail between his legs! But he was down on his luck, on the run from the law, and she was his only hope. She pretended to be nothing but a poor old widowed farmwife, the *vuile trut,* but the whole family knew about that supposedly secret hoard she kept stashed away in the chimney. Who did she think she was kidding?

Ah, there was the house, and—unbelievable!—there was that stupid bird in its nest. He scooped up a stone from the ground and drew back his arm to let it fly—then checked himself and dropped it with a curse. A stork on the roof brought good luck, they said; maybe Oma Annie would be a little more likely to help him out if this once he left her pet alone.

"Roel," the old witch cried when she saw him, when he'd let himself into the house and found her upstairs in bed, loafing away the afternoon. "What are *you* doing here?" Grudgingly she offered him her cheek, and he swallowed his disgust and brushed the papery skin with his lips.

"I'm in trouble, Oma," he said. "I need money, as much as you can spare. I've got to go away for a while. I—"

"Money?" The word exploded from her mouth like a gunshot. "You don't come to see me for years and years, and then suddenly you turn up here and ask me for *money?*"

"You bet I do," he raged. "And don't tell me you haven't got any, either! Do you think I'm such an idiot I don't know about that famous pile Opa Fokke left you when he died?"

He stormed over to the fireplace and reached up inside the black mouth of the chimney to feel around for the treasure trove he had so often heard the grownups discussing in secretive whispers when they thought he was sound asleep. His grandmother was shrieking some nonsense behind him, but he was able to ignore her—until she tore away her ragged blanket and flung herself at his back with the last of her waning strength. Her weight was negligible, yet still she knocked him off balance and threw him up against the mantelpiece, jarring a decade's accumulation of soot loose within the chimney and filling the room with a dense black cloud.

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Blinded, he staggered away from the mantel to tumble over the old woman, who lay gasping hoarsely on the floor. Her body broke his fall, but his fall did not break her body, not quite. She clawed at him with feeble fingers, screaming shrilly, and he slapped her across the face with the full force of his hand.

Then, at last, there was silence in the room.

The soot slowly settled and, when he could see again, the first thing he saw was Oma Annie on the floor.

She was not moving.

She was not breathing.

She was dead.

And everywhere in the thick black dust from the chimney, his footprints and fingerprints stared up at him, accusing him.

It's not my fault, he thought wildly. It isn't fair!

Outside the window, the chimes of the village's churchbell sounded across the fields. It was five o'clock. His mother would be there in half an hour!

He searched the room frantically, desperately, and at the back of a cluttered closet he found at last an ancient upright vacuum cleaner. He dragged it around Oma Annie's body to the outlet by the chimney and plugged it in. But he flipped its rusty toggle switch in the wrong direction by mistake, and instead of sucking *in* air, the damned machine began to roar air *out,* an electrical dragon exhaling its noisy, stale breath into the room.

By the time he thought to turn the switch the other way, the vacuum cleaner had blown an enormous cloud of soot back up the shaft of the chimney. The cloud blasted through the loose construction of the stork's nest above and Annie Dekkers' *ooievaartje,* terrified, spread its wings and flew away forever, its body black and sluggish with the weight of the soot.

Roel, busy vacuuming away the evidence that tied him to his grandmother's death, neither saw nor heard it go. When the room was cleaned to his satisfaction, he silenced the dragon and went back to the chimney. Feeling around inside it, he discovered a loose brick in the far wall. There was a deep cavity hollowed out behind it, and within that opening his fingers touched metal. A box. He pulled it gently free and opened its lid—and stared in wonderment at his Opa Fokke's legacy.

Not cash, not stocks or bonds, not jewels.

Gold coins.

Hundreds of them.

Gold!

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It was Thursday night in the city, *koopavond,* the one evening when the stores stayed open late to accommodate those shoppers who worked during the day.

In the area up and down Damrak and Rokin and the Kalverstraat, from the Centraal Station at one end to the Munt Tower and the Leidseplein at the other, the city was bright with neon and alive with activity. The shops, the *bruin cafés,* the restaurants swirled with the comings and goings of bustling crowds.

Only in the Jordaan, one of Mokum's oldest sections, was it quiet. An auto showroom, a *melkboer,* a couple of snack bars were open for business, but otherwise the district was dark.

There were several battered trashcans at the end of the alley that ran along one side of the showroom, invisible from the mouth of the alley because of the magnificent new sportscar that was parked there. But the gull did not need to see the cans to know they were there; its keen sense of smell guided it unerringly to the spot. It dropped from the sky to light on the rim of the fullest can, and began at once to pick busily through a layer of discarded advertising circulars towards the tasty scraps of unfinished sandwich beneath.

Two men deep in conversation turned into the alley from the direction of the showroom entrance. "Good luck with it!" the older man said cheerfully, and shook the other's hand with a firm and friendly grip. The customer, looking affluent in an immaculate cream-colored suit, a bright gold coin gleaming richly from his left earlobe, took the keys the salesman held out to him and climbed eagerly into the driver's seat of his new car.

But the young man with the earring had never driven a stick shift before, and he accidentally shifted into reverse instead of low. As he eased his foot from the clutch, the car bucked backwards and smashed into the garbage cans behind it. The driver muttered an exasperated curse and raced around to inspect the damage he had caused.

He was interested only in the car, of course, and never even noticed the mangled body of the dead gull in the crumpled trashcan that lay on its side at the back of the alley.

Gerard Valkenier picked despondently at his dinner. He had ordered frog legs, but the waitress had brought him someone else's chicken livers by mistake. He had thought of complaining, but what did it really matter? What did *anything* matter any more? The stork was almost a month overdue, and he was certain by now

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that it was never coming. What had gone wrong? Why hadn't he heard from Kuypers? And what was left for him now, except to try to pick up the pieces of his undistinguished career at the zoo?

As he gazed sadly out the window by his table, a majestic black stork winged by. But for once in his life he was too depressed to admire the simple beauty of a bird in flight.

Birds, he thought miserably, and lifted his knife and fork to attack the defenseless bits of chicken on his plate.

And then he froze, goosebumps rippling across his skin.

A *black* stork?

But there *are* no black storks! *All* storks are white! This black one must be a mutant of some sort, a previously unknown species, an aberration as rare and important as, say, that albino rhino Smedts was so insufferably proud of!

My God, he thought, I'll be famous! This is even better than the diamonds!

He slapped a hundred-guilder bill down on the table to pay for the meal he had hardly touched and bolted out of the restaurant without waiting for his change. The bright-eyed watersnipe on the banknote seemed to watch him go, its soft brown feathers glittering in the overhead lighting.

Fred Bogaard and Ad van de Polder sat in their dumpy Kevertje, waiting patiently for the street ahead of them to clear. The protesters had been parading slowly through the intersection for more than ten minutes now, and their ranks showed no signs of thinning out anytime in the near future. Bogaard and Van de Polder were in no hurry, though, and they were both sympathetic to the marchers' point of view. If they hadn't been on duty, in fact, Van de Polder at least would have been out there carrying a placard himself.

"I like that one," he said, pointing past the windshield at three braless young women in thin T-shirts holding up a banner that read IN EUROPA STORT HET VAN DE REAGAN.

"The message or the messengers?" Bogaard smiled. "Hey, what's that one supposed to mean?"

"Which? You mean SS-20, EUROPA-0?"

"No, no. To the left. No, you can't see it any more, he's just turned away. But it's that kid in the army jacket, looks like an American escapee from the '60's. The sign he's carrying says PERSHING 1-5314. What do you think *that's* all about?"

"*Geen idee.* Maybe they've figured out where they've got the

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missiles siloed, and those are the location coordinates or something. Hey, look at that one. WE ALL HATE JAN. What's that doing *here?"*

"Got me. Poor Jan, whoever he is."

The driver of the sportscar in front of them chose that moment to lose his patience. He leaned on his horn and kept right on leaning.

Bogaard and Van de Polder exchanged long-suffering looks.

"What do you think?" Van de Polder sighed. "Shall we?"

"Might as well," said Bogaard. "That is what they pay us for."

The Volkswagen's doors swung open simultaneously in a fluid movement that looked as if it had been practiced a thousand times before, and the two men stepped out.

"Tjongejonge," Bogaard murmured, shaking his head at the badly dented rear fender of the brand-new sportscar.

As they approached the driver, Van de Polder had to shout to make himself heard over the blare of the horn and the background din of the demonstration.

"What's your hurry, there, sir? Don't you think these folks have a right to—"

The driver heard him then, and turned to find the two of them hovering over him, tall and confident in their royal blue uniforms. His hand jerked away from the horn button as if it had bitten him. His white suit and large gold earring shone brilliantly in the afternoon sun, but the expression on his youthful face was one of fear.

"Well, well, well," Van de Polder grinned, his voice lower now and clearly amused, "if it isn't Roel Olpers. And in a lovely new car, too. Last time I laid eyes on you, Roel, you could barely afford to ride the tram. What happened, *makker,* you win the Lotto?"

"And speaking of trams," added Bogaard, "we've been hearing some nasty stories about you the last couple of days, Roel. I think we're going to have to ask you to come along with us for a little chat, once this street opens up."

From above, an acrid blob of white dropped onto the shoulder of the driver's beautiful suit, and the two policemen burst out laughing.

Roel Olpers looked up to see a sleek black shape sail regally across the sky. Last time it was a white bird, spoiling his black leather jacket. This time it's a black bird, ruining his new white suit. Why were they against him? Why were they all against him? *"Getverdemme!"* he shouted, shaking his fist at the bird in impotent fury.

A hundred demonstrators took up the cry, screaming *"Getver-*

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demme!" at the top of their lungs, threatening the heavens with their tightly clenched fists.

There, below, an empty nest! A bit small, perhaps, but that could be fixed. The stork swooped down eagerly. It was tired, and ready to rest.

No, it saw, as it came closer, the nest was not empty after all. There were eggs in there, four of them, four perfect eggs abandoned and in need of love. They were gull eggs, but the stork neither knew nor cared. They were eggs, that was all that mattered, and it was a lost and lonely creature in search of a nest.

It landed, and settled itself comfortably atop the eggs.

It could not experience emotion, of course—not as we humans experience emotion—but all the same it was happy, in its own gentle way.

Valkenier paced back and forth in his Churchilllaan apartment like a caged animal, exploding with frustrated energy. Somewhere in or near the city was a unique black stork, the find of a lifetime, and he had no idea how to go about tracking it down. Damn, damn, *damn!*

Well, there was nothing to be done about it. He might as well go back to the Bird House and start digging into that pile of paperwork on his desk. Perhaps that would keep him from thinking of killing himself.

"Did you see it? A stork. A *black* stork! It's moved into that gull's nest on the roof of Building B."

"A stork? You don't say! *Jee,* won't our gull kick up a fuss when it comes back and finds out someone else's muscled in on its eggs!"

"Did you say a *black* stork, Ed? I never saw me a black one before."

"Me, neither, now I think about it. A black stork . . . "

"Maybe we'd better ring up the newspapers or somebody and let them know it's here, don't you think?"

"Sure, there's an idea!"

"Maybe they'll name it after us!"

"The Bijlmer Bird, I can see it all now. *Geweldig!"*

Valkenier slammed down the phone and grabbed for the camera that was always ready in the bottom drawer of his desk. He raced downstairs to the parking lot and laid a black streak of rubber on the pavement as he screamed off towards the zoo's main gate.

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The sky was sprinkled with fleecy white clouds, though off to the west a grey thunderhead was beginning to form. Valkenier wound through the city streets as quickly as the afternoon traffic would allow, then left them behind him and picked up speed for the last few kilometers out to the Bijlmerbajes.

The gate guard was expecting him, and pointed across the yard to Building A, where an excited knot of officials were waiting for him.

They led him proudly to the roof of the building and took him to its northern side. One story below them and fifty meters to the north was the roof of Building B; from their vantage point atop Building A, they had a clear view of the nest and its occupant. Valkenier raised his camera to his eye, and its long telephoto lens drew the scene even closer.

And, yes, incredible as it seemed, the bird in the nest was a dark grey, an almost *black* stork!

Breathless at the sight of it, he set his f-stop and shutter speed and rolled into focus and started shooting.

And then the gathering storm clouds broke open and a shower blew quickly towards them. Valkenier lowered his camera and turned to go.

As the first drops hit him, his mind was already racing with plans for his next visit, for many visits, with lots of film and his video camera and portable VTR, and perhaps he should rent an Arriflex for sixteen millimeter coverage as well.

He turned back for one more look at the bird—and stared horrified at the soot streaming from its feathers in the rain. As the blackness washed away, revealed beneath it was an ordinary white stork.

His jaw dropped open.

Again, he thought dully, they've done it to me again.

As he stood there, glued to the spot, the chill rain coursing down his cheeks like tears, the stork struggled upright and spread its wings to shake off the heavy water and the last of the soot.

There was a slight bulge visible on one of its legs, in a place where no bulge ought to have been.

For a moment, it was as if Valkenier's heart stopped beating. Then, with a trembling hand, he brought the camera back to his eye and stared hopefully through its telephoto lens.

"My diamonds!" he shrieked. "My diamonds!"

"Diamonds?" said the warden at his elbow. "What's all this about diamonds?"

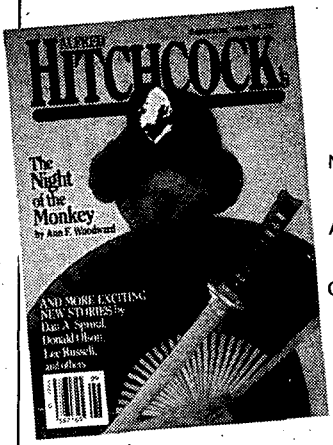
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Roel Olpers paced the narrow confines of the cell, his mind awhirl with vindictive dreams of revenge on those two lousy cops, on the arrogant prosecutor and that so-smug judge, on his mother and his dead *oma* and the whole damned system. Sitting on his bunk in the corner with his head sunk pitifully in his hands, Gerard Valkenier was lost in his own private thoughts.

Two guards strolled down the corridor outside. "Get a load of those birds," said the elder to the younger, who had just been reassigned to the prison that morning. "The *zenuwpees* with the hole in his ear's been in there for two weeks now, and the other one for eight or nine days, and I haven't heard a peep out of either one of them in all that time. Real silent types, the both of them."

But beyond the bars of the window on the far wall of the cell, there was much peeping to be heard. On the roof of Building B a proud mama stork had her beak full, feeding the quartet of noisy baby gulls that surrounded her in her nest.

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FICTION

In the Lake at Garlock's Bend

by David Kaufman

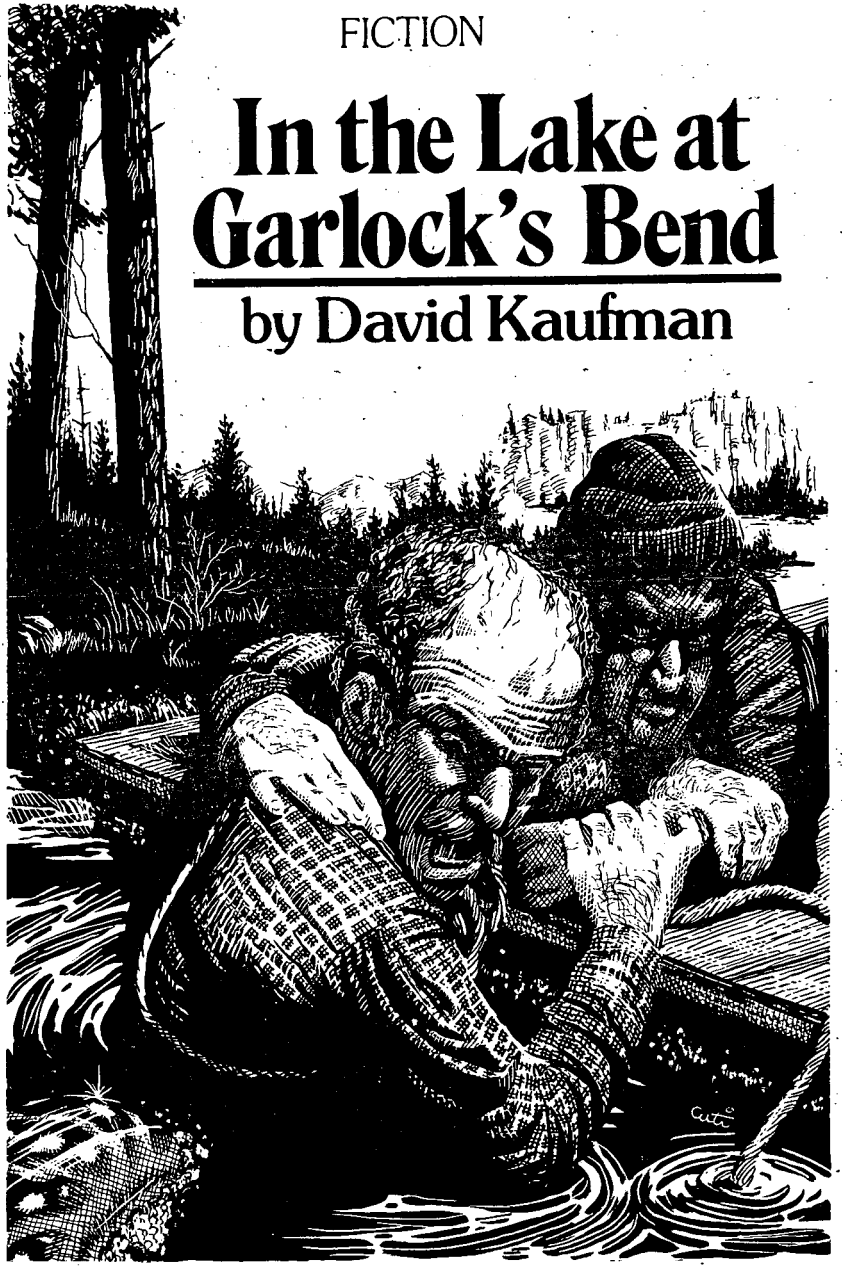


Illustration by Nicola Cuti

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We didn't lose anyone who was a pillar of the town, as they say, or anyone young, or even rich. It wasn't anybody like that. Actually, the only one we lost was the town wastrel—Joe Michaels—and nobody really cared a whole lot at all about him. That is, until they saw him die. You could hardly not care about him if you saw that, poor devil.

And a good many of us did see him die. It isn't something I'll ever forget.

Almost all the people of the town, too, are gone now, because of it. Some kind of fear, or terror, or whatever, got to them. Something. I don't know. The gruesome ugliness. The whole *thing*, I guess, just got to eating at us all somehow, until it kind of destroyed us—and little by little, over a period of time, everybody sort of picked up and left. As if you could ever get away, could ever escape so easy, could put something so bad as what happened out of your mind. Memories die hard, you know? Especially awful ones.

Sold off at first, the early ones, when they still could get buyers. People just abandoned their places later when the thing began to snowball and no one would buy. But from the start there was no help for Joe. No help for him at all. I could have told them so because I watched the whole ugly mess. Over a whole night and a morning. Watched it get worse and worse.

They kept trying, I'll give them that. Even though it was hopeless. But some things, I guess, you got to go ahead and try for yourself. Especially if somebody's life is at stake. It's kind of like, in a crazy kind of way, your own is on the line, if you know what I mean.

Me, I'm leaving too. Finally. I'll be the last. Except there's Walt Bowser. And he won't ever leave. I'd bet on it. He's the one who was most affected. Walking around like he does now just poking into things, all sorts of crazy places, like he was looking to find something. You know—something important and he just *has* to find it. Won't say what. Maybe it's nothing. I don't know.

I guess it fixed him good, what happened.

So there's no one left but Walt and me. The town is ours, so to speak. And everything in it. Some gift, eh? Like inheriting a garbage dump. Well, I'm leaving, and old Walt, as I said, I suspect he'll never leave—he'll die here.

He was there, that night, fishing with Joe. Behind Miller's Hardware. There was just the two of them, like they always done—worm fishing from the

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bank and drinking beer. It wasn't far from the town. In fact, if you go down the street a ways there, you can see where they were. It's kind of a nice place, under some trees, a grassy bank, close enough to town that it don't matter—you could always go get some more beer if you needed it. That was part of it for them.

Anyway, this night there was a meeting in town and half the town was there. And old Joe and Walt was fishing, like I said.

It happened so fast I guess there ain't no way to tell it but fast. All of a sudden we heard this terrible scream, a scream fit to end all screams, and then a second, a different one, like a long cry of anguish. At first we just sat there all dumb like, and then people started to scramble up and rush outside. And when most of us got out on the street, we seen Walt running towards us as if he was scared clear out of all of his wits, wailing at us so and running.

"Help! Oh, my God, help!" he screamed. "Something's got Joe in the water. Help!"

When he got to us, one look at his face would tell you something was bad. Very bad. This had nothing to do with the beer. This was the real thing.

"Slow down, slow down," Harry Hamilton shouted. He grabbed Walt by the shoulders. "Tell us what happened. What's going on here?"

"You got to help Joe," Walt screamed. "You *got* to. We got to get him out of the water!"

"Come on, now, Walt," someone said. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's Joe! Oh, Christ! It's Joe! He's out in the water and something's got hold of him." He looked so full of anguish. "He's . . . Something's got Joe in the water, I tell you."

"Now what the hell."

"Don't be crazy."

"I know it sounds crazy," he cried. "But it's true! Something's got him by the legs."

"Wait," someone laughed, "you're half lit again."

"I ain't," he cried. "I ain't. Look at me, for Christ's sake!"

And then, and it was like the first time we really saw him, we got a good look at his clothes. They was all ripped, and wet, and had lots of mud and slime on them. He looked like he was about done in.

"Look," he said. "Look! It took me under!" And he showed us his ankle. There was great welts on it, almost like slash marks, and bleeding. "Whatever the hell it is, it almost got me first. Pulled me under like nothing. And then it pulled Joe in." He gestured pathetically.

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"And now it's holding him down there, not clear in the water and not clear out. Just holding him. We got to do something."

Nobody was laughing when they seen his leg. No, sir. Nobody laughed then. We listened to what he was saying.

So then, almost as a body, we stumbled in the dark down to the water where they was fishing. Behind Miller's stores, where I pointed out to you. And then, after a lot of commotion and complaints for light, some hurried back for flashlights and floodlights and other kinds of lights—so we could see, you know?

And when we got to shining the lights out there at Joe, there he was, about ten feet out in the water. And all the rest dark. The funniest thing, he wasn't moving up and down, you know. Now, the water there is very deep—I mean *very* deep—but he wasn't moving. And it was deep enough he couldn't have been standing. Ever. He just couldn't. He was just sort of suspended about waist deep, like he was being held right there, and kind of swaying this way and that. There was a terrible look of anguish on his face, and his hands was going in hopeless little circles. And he was moaning. But that's about all. It was a terrible sight.

Most everybody, and me too, I reckon, just stood there for a time, looking at him, shocked.

And then we heard him. "It's got me, Walt. Yup. It's got me, all right." And then a long wail.

But it was like he couldn't slump over into the water, not even for a little. You know what I mean? He was as rigid, and he didn't even bow his head. It was eerie.

"Got me. Help me. Please, help me! Come on you guys!"

The men began to discuss what the hell to do. The women just kind of stood there, looking.

I kept to one side of the men and listened.

"We could throw out a rope," someone tried.

"Or maybe float a ladder out. Give him something strong to hold on to. Or maybe a big log."

Then everybody started to yelp and holler all at once. It was really something, hearing them all talking, shrieking, offering frantic suggestions—most of them well-intentioned but *way* off base.

And Joe out there, making less and less noise, just somehow suspended in the water. And the look on his face. It would have broken your heart.

The women had begun to wail by this time. They were certain, in the way that only women have, that old Joe was

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a goner. Keening away and praying out loud.

I was certain he was, too. Old Joe *was* a goner.

"Let's get a rope and lasso the son of a bitch," Bill Hardtack shouted. "Hell, that can't be so hard to do. Pull him right in."

"Yeah. That should work."

"Here. I got a rope. Let's try it." That was Bill Miller, the owner of the hardware store.

"Well, let's do it then," someone said. "Let's get it done."

"Come on," Bill shouted. "Watch the hell out of the way. Give me some room."

"That ain't going to work," Walt said. "It won't. You guys don't understand what you're up against." He shook his head slowly. "And poor old Joe ain't going to last much longer. Look at him. What the hell do you think he's made of?"

"Come on, Walt."

"What would *you* do? How would you react? Hell, most of you sons of bitches would be out there crying like babies. I know what it was like to be grabbed. I felt it, all right. I felt it. And if *you* did, you'd know too. You'd know." He was quiet a moment. "We got to do what we can to save him. We *can't* save him, but we got to do what we can." He started coiling the rope. "God knows what it is out there, I don't. But it ain't nothing that lives in a little lake like we got. And a dinky little rope ain't going to do the job."

"Well, let's do *some*thing," Bob Benson said. "Let's at least be able to say we tried."

"But what the hell *is* it?"

"Who gives a damn. It's *some*thing. We got to get him out anyway. Or do the damnedest we can to try."

The women were mostly all praying by this time, moaning and wailing and praying to the good God above to save old Joe. The guy they never gave even a little damn about before now.

And the face in the shining lights was blank now, just blank—with almost no sense of fear or anguish, or even awareness of what was going on. It was almost like he wasn't even there. Like his soul was already from him. I don't know.

I tell you, it was horrid. That's the only word for it.

"Let's try the rope."

"Yeah. Let's give that a try. Let's use the rope."

They all looked at Walt. He stared at them a few minutes and then nodded in disgust.

So they all stood in kind of a semicircle, but spread out, you know, enough to give Bill Miller room enough to make a lasso and give it a heave out to old Joe. It wasn't so difficult, actually, because Joe was well lit up and only about maybe ten or fifteen feet out in the water.

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And he wasn't moving hardly at all now, like I said.

So Bill got the rope around him on the first try. And then he pulled it till it was kind of tight around Joe's arms.

And him saying, when you could understand him, "Yup! It's got me, Walt. It's got me, all right. I'm a goner, boys." And, "Watch yourselves. Watch out for it!"

"Okay, men," Bill said, kind of soft. "Let's go easy now. Let's don't hurt him any more than we have to." The men were lining up. "Not too hard, now," he said again.

And they all got a hold on the rope and started to back off slowly, pulling back kind of gingerly, you know.

I stood over to one side. Me and Walt, and we watched. I think maybe old Walt was weeping a little, but I ain't sure.

They pulled till the rope was tight, and then Bill said, "Okay now. Back up slowly. Slowly, now. *Slowly,* I said!"

And the rope got tight enough till it was all out of the water, real taut, you know? But old Joe was just suspended there, and as they pulled harder and harder he began to moan louder and louder till he started to scream in pain. But he didn't move none. They couldn't budge him none at all.

And then Bill shouted, "Ease off, men. Let go of the rope." And he coiled it up. "This won't work," he said. "It won't." And then because he couldn't get it loose he threw it into the water towards Joe. "That ain't no damned good."

"Now what the hell are we going to do?"

"What the hell is right. I'll tell you one thing. I ain't going out there."

"Me neither."

"I sure ain't."

"You know what?" someone said. "We could lay out some ladders like someone already said, and build some scaffolding to them, and get out close to him and support him some way so that at least the son of a bitch, whatever it is, couldn't pull him under. We could do that."

"Not me."

"I said not me, neither."

"Well, some of us will. Some of us will try, I'll bet." He looked up. "Come on, you guys. Goddamn it! Which of you guys are going to help?"

"I will," said one.

"I will, too," said another.

And soon there was about a dozen or fifteen guys who were willing to get it on this try. You know? So a bunch ran off to get some big wooden ladders, others to get some lumber, and the rest of us just stood, watching old Joe's face in the lights aimed

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out at him from the shore. It was unreal. I mean it.

And then this wild thing happened. Old Joe starts moving backwards quickly, and then forwards just as fast, as if the thing, whatever it was, had used him like a whip. His head smashed against the water and went under, and then up he comes, just like nothing had happened. Honest. Just like nothing had happened. The water was quiet right away and all. And it was just as quick as I'm telling it.

It was pretty scary and disgusting, and this one guy was even throwing up. And all the women started to wail again and scream. And who could blame them?

"Why don't you women go home?" Bill Miller snapped. "Why don't you get out of here? You can't help. This ain't going to be nothing you'll want to see if you can help it." He paused some few moments. And then, more kindly, "Go home. Go home and pray."

Well, some women left, like slowly and unsure of themselves, unsure maybe if it was right to leave. Some of them stayed, too, as if they were drawn by the thing in the water and couldn't help it. It was like that with most of us. There was something pulling us all into whatever was happening, and we almost didn't *want* to leave. I'll tell you, it was a strange thing. I mean, real strange. Something unnatural.

By this time a lot of the men had got back, with ladders and planking, and so they began the task of making a scaffolding or platform kind of thing so that they could get out to Joe. You could hear some of them saying things like, "Well, I ain't going to touch him," and, "Nothing, but nothing, could get me to put my hands on him. I don't like doing this, but I'll do it. But I ain't going to let that thing get at me, by God!"

You could hardly blame them. In fact, I was surprised that so many *were* willing to help old Joe.

I knew, don't ask me how, that no good would come of any of it, and so did old Walt. We just stood on the sidelines sort of. We didn't say hardly anything to each other—we just stood and watched what was going on. And old Walt would shake his head now and again, as if in great sadness. As if it were somehow on his shoulders.

Well, the hours went to ticking by, and the men were going at building the platform, or whatever you would want to call it. And in time they got it out to him and kind of surrounded him with it, encasing

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him maybe two feet all around, and wide enough between him and the shore part to get two or three men out to him, and get his arms up over the platform to support himself and keep the thing from pulling him under.

But you could tell that he didn't even hardly know what was going on. Maybe once in a while he'd ramble, and generally it was always the same thing: "It's got me. Yup. Got me, Walt." And, "Watch yourself, Walt. Watch yourself." And then he once said, so quiet you could barely hear him—and it broke my heart—"Let me go, Walt. Let it take me. It don't matter no more. I don't care no more. But don't let it get to you." All this in a kind of hopeless and helpless moan, or a low wail maybe.

Well, old Bill Miller and Bill Hardtack went creeping out on the platform they had built. Little by little, slowly, till they got to him. They went slowly, you could tell, out of concern for Joe and because they were so afraid. And the platform rocked pretty badly under their weight.

It was nearly dawn by that time. It had taken that long to build the thing.

"Come on, Joe," I heard Bill Miller say. "Don't give in to it. Hang on. We'll get you. We'll get you out. Whatever it is, we'll get you loose of it. I promise. Don't give in, Joe. Please, don't give in."

And then they grabbed the rope that was still around him and got his arms up on the platform and used the rope to kind of tie him up so he couldn't be pulled down under because of all the wood in the platform. The platform would keep him up, you see. And then they crawled slowly back to shore.

So now he was safe for the moment.

By this time, too, it was fully daylight. We had turned off all the lamps.

And it was Sunday morning. I remember that because we could tell all of the women who had left were in church now and singing. Singing, I guess, for old Joe. Some of the others along the shore left to join them—singing as they went. It was weird—all quiet where we were, and that singing off a ways in the church. It was almost peaceful.

And everything was calm for about an hour then, except for the faraway singing and maybe the lapping of the water along the shore. Both Bills and the rest of the men were just in a kind of trance, sitting along the shore, looking out at Joe and trying to think what to do.

And then I seen old Walt get up and leave. I thought that was odd. I couldn't figure on his

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leaving because he and Joe were such friends. He just left without a word.

"I don't even want to say this," Bill Miller said. "But it's true. When I had a hold of his arms I felt all tingling from my head to my toes, and Joe, he was all cold. He seemed like he was alive, but he sure was all cold." He shook his head. "But that tingling feeling. That was bad. That wasn't real. That's what got Joe. Something that ain't real got him."

"You guys are lucky that it didn't get a hold of you," someone said. "You wouldn't catch me out there." The man shook his head. "No, sir."

"Me, neither."

"I wouldn't go out there for a million dollars."

Well, the talk went on like this for some time, and I could tell that the men were defeated. They had given up. You can tell that about a group of men. There's something just goes. You can sense it. And I can't say I could ever blame them.

But they just all sat there and watched the platform kind of bob up and down slowly. Joe wasn't so rigid now—his head was following the rhythm of the bobbing. No one offered any idea of what to do next.

Then Walt comes up behind Joe, from way off, and slow, so Joe couldn't see him. Just sits there quietly in a rowboat. And he waits. None of us acknowledged him. I guess we were sort of hypnotized by the bobbing platform. Or something, I don't know. Maybe just defeated and not caring no more. Maybe just tired enough not to see him.

And then Joe all of a sudden jerked his head up, fully alert, as if he knew something now for sure. He looked terrified, and he screamed, "Oh, God, no! Please, no! Don't let it! Please stop it! *Please!*" Then he let out a long wail, and then he screamed, "Here I go boys! Here I go! Wa-a-alt!"

And the platform started to shake and then it somehow seemed to break up all at once, like there was a tremendous power pulling and pushing at it. And loud crashing sounds. And just as he began to go under, Walt stood up in the rowboat and took off the top of old Joe's head with a twelve gauge. Joe never knew what hit him.

And he disappeared under the water almost immediately, just like something pulled him down—quickly, angrily almost. Then almost as quickly the pieces of platform stopped rocking in the water and even the water itself became calm.

Except for the hunks of platform floating there quietly, it was almost like nothing had happened.

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We all sat there, dumbfounded.

None of us could say a word. Then it seemed like a long time passed. A real long time. And it was kind of like when we came to our senses all we saw was old Walt rowing away silently, all by himself, calmly, just like he was out for a ride, say. And then one by one we got up and left—those who owned them picking up their lamps, and like that. I was the last to leave. At the end there wasn't much to show we'd even been there, just the pushed-down grass and a few pieces of wood floating close off shore. And the quiet.

So that's how Joe Michaels died. Walt blew him away just before the thing, whatever the hell it was, finally pulled him down under the water.

My best guess is that Walt knew as time went on that night that he was going to have to do that. None of the rest of us even thought ourselves capable of it, I'd wager. Leastwise, no one ever admitted to thinking it. But Walt was grabbed by the thing first, remember. He knew what it was like. He knew all right. He understood. What else could he do? Let his friend go like that? My God.

And what could we do?

Some of the people afterwards just avoided Walt like he was poison, like he was the plague. As if they couldn't deal with his killing Joe, or maybe even coming to *blame* him. You know? And a couple of the rest of us tried to befriend him, but Walt, he wouldn't have anything to do with anybody.

Nobody, but *no*body, ever went near the lake again. Never. Except old Walt, like I said, sometimes he just rambles along the shore. He never does anything more than that, though. Just kind of aimless wandering. I guess it's aimless. I don't know—maybe it means something to *him*.

But it was almost like the lake wasn't even there to the rest of us. People seemed to want to deny it, to put it out of their minds. I guess they couldn't live with the whole of it—with Joe's death and Walt killing him the way he did. Some of them even *blaming* him, as I said. Mostly maybe they couldn't bear to believe in whatever the hell it is that must still be out there in the lake.

So, one by one they began to sell off and leave—and then when that wouldn't work any longer, they just locked their doors and away they went. It's funny—they knew they weren't ever coming back, and yet they locked their doors.

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There's just the two of us now, Walt and me. And don't ask me why I stayed so long. I guess maybe it has something to do with Walt. I kind of admire him so, even if I *do* think most of what he does is unusual, or compulsive, to say the least. You just got to admire a man who could do what he did. To save Joe from a death like that. It took one hell of a man. One hell of a real man. Maybe what he did was, like I don't know, like an act of love. I know they were friends—they understood each other. Very deeply. Maybe an act of love. I mean, why did Joe scream Walt's name just as he went under, you know?

Whatever. Walt deserved better treatment from us than he ever got—much better. I *do* know that.

I'm leaving. There's nothing here for me.

I wish Walt would have talked to me, though. You know, deep talk. I do wish that. I'd maybe have answers to some of the questions I have, like—could they *both* have known how it was going to end? How it *had* to end? Could they have been that close? That's a question to be asked.

Forgiveness. Perhaps if I had that talk with Walt I could maybe get a little of that. I could use it. A little peace. After all, I mostly stood and watched, and I only helped a little—did less than most.

Walt's not at peace either. You can tell that. It's like—I don't know. No matter how heroic he was. It's as if he has to settle something, and there's just no way for him to do it. Except to just keep on. Just keep on. So there's no peace for him either. But maybe peace is just an idle dream now, maybe an idle dream for all of us who were involved—as watchers or otherwise.

I do know this. Walt's still looking for something—*some*thing. He's still at it—and you have to hand him something for that. He's sure no quitter. He roams around. Almost as if he's afraid to stop. That's all he does. God knows what he's after. Whatever it is, I hope he finds it.

He'll be alone now.

Just him—and whatever it is that's still out in the lake.

I'll bet my soul it's still out there. Maybe waiting for somebody.

Maybe just waiting for Walt.

SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":

Clay won the race.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

Bickmore Deals with the Duchess

by J. S. Fletcher

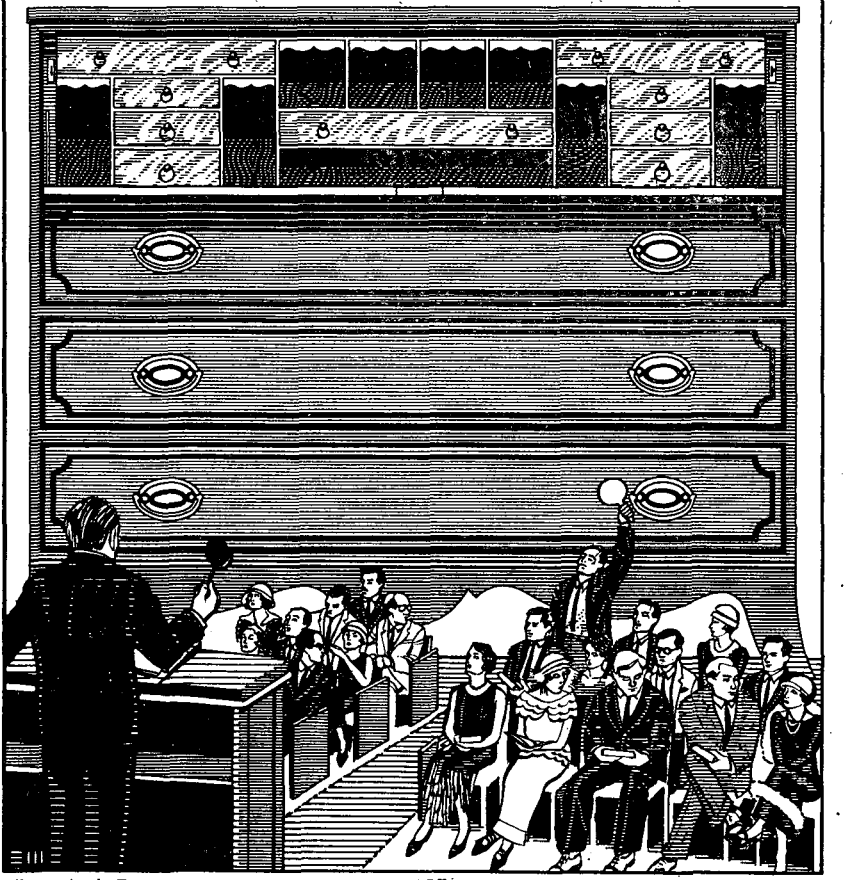


Illustration by Eric Marcus

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When Bickmore, who dealt in antique furniture, old pictures, and the like at a gloomy old shop in the High Market at Norcaster, set out one morning to attend the sale by auction of the effects of a resident of the town who had recently died, he had no idea that any romance or sensational development would result from whatever he might do that day. Neither was foreign to his trade; in his time he had known both. More than once romance had sprung from his acquisition of some ancient cabinet; now and then the clue to a crime had been found in a bit of furniture casually purchased and set aside to be examined at leisure; on one occasion a missing will had been discovered hidden away in a frowsy old book which Bickmore had bought for five shillings and would cheerfully have sold for twenty. But these events and developments were rare; they were accidents, like the sudden and unexpected turnings-up of a perfect and complete and undoubtedly genuine set of Chippendale chairs in a house where you would never have thought to find such a thing, or the discovery of an unquestionable Gainsborough or a gem of a Reynolds in the garret of a countryman's cottage. And nobody expects accidents, and Bickmore expected nothing more that morning than that he was going to buy two or three or four lots of the old stuff which Mr. Septimus Walkinshaw had left on departing this life.

The late Mr. Walkinshaw, in his time, had been a well-to-do chartered accountant in the town, a man of considerable means. But he was also known as an antiquary, and as an occasional collector who knew good things when he saw them. Bickmore, who had once or twice visited the old gentleman's quiet house in the Friaries, knew that several articles of ancient furniture were now to be offered for sale by auction which were specially worth buying. In the preliminary stages of the proceedings he bought two or three such things, but he was never really interested until there was put up an old bureau of great age at which he himself had seen its late owner writing. It was a beautiful bit of work, in excellent preservation: oddly enough, there was no great competition for it, and Bickmore acquired it for fifty guineas, and later in the day had it transferred to his warehouse with his other purchases. For the rest of that afternoon and evening, however, being otherwise busied, he gave no more thought to it. And he was not even thinking about it next morning when, soon after Norcaster had awakened to another day's business, into his shop came bustling the auctioneer under whose hammer the bureau had fallen, and who now carried in his hand the buff envelope of a telegram.

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"Morning, Bickmore!" said the auctioneer, who was on familiar terms with every tradesman in the town. "Fine morning! Look here!—this came while I was at breakfast. Here—read it for yourself. It concerns you more than me—as it's a day too late."

Bickmore, who was a man of few words, took the telegram and read:

To Strymer, Auctioneer, Norcaster, England.

Just heard of Walkinshaw's sale. Buy in for me old bureau that stood in his library. Go to any price.

From Duchess of Norcaster, Hotel de Paris, Monte Carlo.

"Of course you'll sell," remarked Strymer, as Bickmore silently handed back the flimsy scrap of paper. "I expect the duchess saw the advertisement of old Walkinshaw's sale in the *Times*, and made a mistake in the actual date. Anyway, I didn't get that until this morning—too late for me to act for her. However, if you'll say what you want, I'll wire at once to Her Grace. Fifty guineas you gave, eh, Bickmore? Well? What's your price for your bargain?"

But Bickmore was rubbing his chin.

"Um!" he answered after a long pause, during which Strymer began to look at him wonderingly. "Afraid I can't say, Mr. Strymer, just now. You see—the fact is, I've a customer in view."

"Oh, come!" expostulated the auctioneer. "Her Grace, now! You can't refuse her! And look at your chance! See what she says: 'Go to any price.' Come now!—name your figure. I don't want to disappoint Her Grace."

But Bickmore shook his head.

"No," he said, "not at present, anyway. The—the other party has an option on it. I can't do anything this morning, Mr. Strymer."

"Come—come!" urged Strymer. "Look here!—say a hundred and fifty! She'll go to that. And that's a hundred clear profit!"

"No," replied Bickmore. "Sorry, but I can't do it."

Strymer tried five minutes' more coaxing, but it was useless. At the end of his fruitless endeavor he went away, grumbling, and Bickmore rubbed his chin still more as he watched him go. And then Bickmore asked himself a question in plain words: Why did the Duchess of Norcaster, who was certainly not a collector, and didn't know a bit of Sheraton from the product of a local cabinetmaker, want Walkinshaw's bureau?—want it so much that she was willing to pay just about any price for it? Why?

The more Bickmore put this question to himself, the more he

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failed to find any likely answer to it. He knew the duchess—everybody knew her—as wife of one of the great local magnates. She was still on the right side of forty; she was good looking; she was popular. She came of an old sporting family, and if she was not on the racecourse, or a puppy-walking show, or at something else connected with dogs or horses, she was at Deauville or at Monte Carlo—as in the present instance—or, if at home, at the bridge table. Sport, cards, games of chance—that was the duchess. And she was wanting to buy Walkinshaw's bureau at any price!—she, whose natural tastes would much more likely have run to something brand new and conspicuously vulgar out of Tottenham Court Road or Kensington. If she had been some relation of old Walkinshaw's, now, and was cherishing a sentimental affection for a piece of furniture regularly associated with him, there might have been something in it, said Bickmore; but she wasn't; Bickmore, though ignorant of Debrett or Burke, was not unacquainted with the duchess's pedigree. She came of a race of hard living, hard riding, hard drinking country squires, and she had been a bit of a hoyden before the duke married her and transformed her into a duchess. But then, reflected Bickmore, everybody in the neighborhood knew that the duke was about as big an ass as they made 'em, and that his spouse did pretty much as she liked. And after all, the present question was—Why did she want that bureau at any price?

When Bickmore had eaten his midday dinner that day, he went back to his place of business and locked himself in the room in which the Walkinshaw bureau had been temporarily stored. He spent a few minutes in looking at it, very thoughtfully; a few more in walking around it and inspecting it from every possible point of view. This over, he began to tap and prod it, as if it had been a prize ox at a cattle show and he was estimating its condition and solidity. And eventually, having unlocked it, he began to examine it within, inch by inch. There was nothing unusual in its appearance, interiorly, but Bickmore was not the man to be deceived by appearances. When he had let down the flap which served as a writing desk and saw the usual neat little pigeonholes, compartments, and miniature drawers all finished with the exquisite perfection of detail peculiar to the old furniture makers, he only saw what he had expected to see. And he did not trouble to open the larger drawers beneath the flap—three of them; good, roomy drawers: Bickmore's concern was with the smaller apparatus at the top. For he had a conviction which had first arisen in his mind when

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Strymer handed him the duchess's telegram and had grown stronger ever since—the conviction that somewhere in old Walkinshaw's bureau there was a secret receptacle, and in it was deposited something which the Duchess of Norcaster was extremely anxious to recover.

It took Bickmore, for all his knowledge of old furniture and the ways of its ingenious makers, the better part of an hour to find what he felt certain, all along, was there. But in the end, after a vast amount of measuring with a pocket foot-rule, and reckoning up measurements with a bit of pencil and scrap of paper, he came suddenly on what he wanted—a small secret drawer, most cunningly contrived. The cleverness of its contrivance was all the more remarkable because, once you knew the secret, it was as easy to bring that drawer to light as it was to open any of the other drawers and compartments about which there was no secret. But there it was, a small, coffin-shaped receptacle, about a quarter the dimensions of a cigar box. And in it lay an oblong parcel, done up in soft tissue paper, and carelessly tied about with a bit of ordinary string, ending in a double knot.

It was characteristic of Bickmore that instead of cutting the string with his penknife he carefully and slowly untied the double knot which secured it; characteristic, too, that he laid the string aside with as much care as if it had been gold cord. It was with similar care that he took off the tissue paper—to reveal an inner wrapping of soft white leather. When that had been unrolled, Bickmore found himself staring at a magnificent diamond necklace—and at a folded half-sheet of notepaper, the only other contents of the mysterious parcel, and the only other contents of the secret drawer.

Bickmore gave his first attention to the half-sheet of notepaper. When he had unfolded it, he saw that a couple of lines of writing ran across it—the stiff, crabbed writing of old Walkinshaw, every letter perfectly formed, every t crossed, and every i dotted. This is what he read:

Received from Mr. Septimus Walkinshaw as a loan the sum of five thousand pounds.

Mirabelle Norcaster

Bickmore began to understand things. The Duchess of Norcaster had borrowed five thousand pounds from Mr. Walkinshaw and had deposited with him as security a diamond necklace. But what interested Bickmore was a question which immediately sprang into

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his mind—Was this *the* necklace which formed a part of the famous Norcaster Diamonds? Everybody had heard of the Norcaster Diamonds—they were an heirloom in the family, going with the title and estate. And of course there was local tradition about them; it was commonly believed that they were kept in a sealed box in the strongroom of some London bank, and were never taken out except to be worn by the duchess of the time being at some unusually great event—a coronation, or a state banquet or ball, or coming-of-age festivity, or ducal reception of royalty, or something equally grand. From an inspection of the stones and their setting, Bickmore was certain that this was *the* necklace. And it was very evident that the duchess had raised five thousand pounds on it from Mr. Walkinshaw, and had seen him place it and her receipt for his money in that secret drawer—good reason why she wanted to buy the bureau! In fact, Bickmore now believed that he saw through the whole thing. The transaction had been an absolutely secret one, between Walkinshaw and the duchess. Soon after it had taken place, Walkinshaw had died, very suddenly; the sale of his effects had soon followed; the duchess wanted to get hold of the bureau in order that she might repossess herself of her diamonds without repaying the loan to Walkinshaw's residuary legatee. And who was *he?* Bickmore did not know; that was a detail . . . the thing to be done at present was. . . .

What Bickmore did was to wrap up the parcel again, replace it in the secret drawer, and have the bureau transferred to a private room, the key of which he put in his pocket. That done he asked himself a question—How soon should he see the duchess?

Bickmore knew the duchess would come. She was sure to come. He felt positive that if Strymer had telegraphed to her that he had been unable to secure the bureau, as he probably had, she would hurry home from Monte Carlo as fast as she could travel. Oh, yes, she would be walking into his shop before many days were over—as sure as his name was Daniel Bickmore. Very good!—but before he was honored with Her Grace's visit, Bickmore was going to know a thing or two.

But before Bickmore progressed far in his pursuit of knowledge, Strymer appeared again—next day. Once more he carried a telegram in his hand. And in his eye there was the expression of a man who feels that though he has been repulsed once, he will certainly not be baffled twice.

"Hullo, Bickmore!" he exclaimed, unceremoniously. "That bureau, now. Here's another wire from the duchess. Of course, I wired

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to her yesterday, after seeing you, and told her that her first telegram had come too late for me to execute her commission, and that you'd bought that particular bit of stuff at Walkinshaw's sale. Here's her reply."

Bickmore, with no show of interest, took the paper which Strymer shoved into his hand, and read what was written thereon.

See Bickmore at once. Give any price he likes. Must have bureau.

"Of course you'll sell, after that?" said Strymer. "Come now!—what's the figure?"

Bickmore handed back the telegram and turned to what he had been doing when the auctioneer came in.

"Can't name any figure, Mr. Strymer," he replied calmly. "I told you yesterday—somebody else has an option on it."

"Just so!—but can't you get rid of him, or her, or whoever it is?" persisted Strymer. "I reckon you'll not get out of him or her what you'll get out of the duchess! See what she says?—'Give any price he likes'! Look here, now!—name your price, and I'll go so far as to settle here and now! Can't say fairer than that, Bickmore, can I? Come!"

"No," answered Bickmore. "Business is business. I'm not in the position to treat. All I've got to say is—if, when the duchess comes home, I still have the bureau to sell, she shall have the first refusal. Can't do more."

Strymer looked at him wonderingly.

"Hanged if I understand this!" he exclaimed. "What is there that's particularly fetching about the thing? Nice bit of old stuff, to be sure—but I've had far nicer through my hands. Fifty guineas didn't you give, eh? And you mean to tell me that whoever it is that's got an option on the bureau will give you so much that you think it worthwhile to refuse my offer on Her Grace's behalf? Cash down, Bickmore! Write you a check this minute—if we agree on a price."

"Can't do it," said Bickmore. "Said all I've got to say."

Bickmore's first step was to go across to the post office and despatch a telegram. That telegram was to a man whom he knew in London—a man who had extensive dealings in precious stones, and was of great repute as an expert. Bickmore had had business transactions with him on various occasions, and knew that he could trust him. And when, in response to the telegram, the man turned up in Norcaster that evening, Bickmore took him home to his

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private house, gave him a good dinner, and later, when they were alone with their cigars and their glasses, suddenly produced the diamond necklace from his pocket, and handing it to his guest asked him laconically what he thought of it.

The expert let the necklace slide through his fingers—lovingly. He made a soft, purring sound as if he had been caressing something for which he had a sentimental affection. But suddenly he rose smartly from his chair, crossed over to a point immediately beneath an electric light, and looked closer, and still closer. And with equal suddenness he turned on his host, and taking his cigar from his lips with one hand, waved the necklace at him with the other, and snapped out a single word:

"Paste!"

Bickmore's face remained as immovable as that of a marble bust which looked down on him and his guest from a bracket in the corner. He nodded over the rim of his glass, which he was just then raising to his lips.

"Paste, eh?" he remarked, indifferently. "You're certain?"

The guest, who was a bluff and hearty sort of person, laughed, threw the necklace on the table, and picking up his own glass took a long pull at its contents.

"As ever they make 'em, my boy!" he answered. "Stake my professional reputation on it—oh, yes—paste! Bee-u-tiful work, my boy—I've a pretty good idea whose work, too!"

"Whose, then?" demanded Bickmore.

"Parisian, my boy—excellent work done there in the imitation-gem line. I should say, if I were asked, as you ask me, my boy, it was done by Legros and Folquet—I've seen a lot of work of theirs. Of course it's a very fine, beautiful, perfectly executed replica of some famous necklace—I daresay I could trace that necklace, if necessary. But—a replica! Not an original. Not diamonds. No, my boy—paste!"

"What's a thing like that worth—as paste?" inquired Bickmore.

The expert rubbed his plump hands together, and drew inspiration from his big cigar.

"Well, my boy, it depends. It's the workmanship, d'ye see? The stuff—pooh! And the setting—not much. It's the imitating of the real thing—the exquisite artistry of the workmanship, my boy! And that's a lovely bit of work—oh, lovely! A few hundred pounds, my boy, at least."

"And the original?" suggested Bickmore. "What about its worth?"

The expert's round face grew grave. He waved his cigar.

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"Ah, my boy!" he said. "Now you ask me a very serious question—a question of the first magnitude! You mean, my boy, that supposing that little toy was made of real diamonds it would be worth—so much?"

"That's just about it," assented Bickmore. "What would the original—diamonds the size and so on of those things—be worth?"

"There's other things than size, my boy," said the expert solemnly. "There's all sorts of things to be taken into consideration in estimating the value of diamonds. But I should say, my boy, that the original of that replica, if the stones are of the first quality, is worth nearer forty than thirty thousand! You might say thirty-five thousand of the best, my boy."

"Very nice figure," observed Bickmore, dryly. "And you haven't the slightest hesitation in saying that this is—paste?"

"Oh, not the slightest, my boy!" affirmed the expert.

"Then oblige me by sitting down at that desk and writing out a certificate to that effect," said Bickmore. "I will need it."

Next morning Bickmore replaced the necklace in the secret drawer of the bureau, but the little parcel of soft leather and tissue paper in which it was enclosed now contained another document in addition to the receipt—the expert's certificate. That done, Bickmore locked up the bureau and the room in which he had stored it. This, he was well aware, was the waiting stage. And he was the sort of man who could wait patiently.

But one day he knew that he would not have to wait long. Turning over the morning papers at his club, his eye caught the Duchess of Norcaster's name. Her Grace had just returned from the Riviera to her town house in London. Bickmore smiled—and from that moment began to expect the duchess at any instant. Many instants went by, however, and many hours, and many days and still no duchess appeared. Bickmore kept his ears open at that center of local gossip, the club; it would soon be known there if the duchess came down to the ducal seat just outside the town. But he heard nothing of her arrival there. Yet one item of interest he did hear, and that was that Her Grace had fallen upon great good luck at the tables at Monte Carlo. That made Bickmore all the more certain that she would come to see him—and with a full purse.

Instead of the duchess, there walked, one afternoon, into his shop an elegantly attired, handsome, middle-aged lady who, when Bickmore first became aware of her distinguished presence, was calmly surveying the various contents of the establishment through a gold-

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mounted lorgnette. She deigned to see Bickmore at last, and surveyed him from top to toe as if he had been a five-foot cupboard.

"Oh—ah—you are Mr. Bickmore, I suppose?" she suggested, in a condescending, high-pitched voice.

"At your service, ma'am," assented Bickmore, with his best bow.

"Just so! I—ah—I am thinking of taking a house near the town, and I should like to look round your stock, don't you know, with the idea of seeing if you have anything—anything particularly good, you know—that would attract me," said the lady. "So much more convenient, you see, if one can find a few things close at hand, don't you know? I hear you sometimes have some exceptionally good pieces of old furniture?"

"Somewhat noted for that, ma'am," replied Bickmore. "I have at times some of the finest old work that you could get anywhere in England, but it's very soon picked up. If you will allow me to show you round . . ."

The visitor was only too willing to be shown round, and Bickmore proceeded to act as guide to his collection. But he was suddenly much more interested in his caller as a personality than as a possible customer. Taking a closer inspection of her as she stood examining certain vases, Bickmore knew that he had seen her before. And just as suddenly he remembered where. About a year previously there had been a great open-air fête in the Duke of Norcaster's park, and Bickmore, in company with several hundreds of his fellow-townsmen and their wives, had attended it. There had been a large house party at the duke's at the time, and its members had moved freely about the grounds. Bickmore now remembered that he had seen this morning's caller strolling around with the duchess. And having settled that point, he lost all interest in her as a customer, and began to watch her as something else—a spy.

But Bickmore was careful to keep playing his own part. He took his visitor from room to room, showing her things that were of note and value; finally, well knowing what he was doing, he unlocked the door of the room in which he had stored the Walkinshaw bureau, and ushered her in with the remark that there were a few choice articles there which were well worth inspection. Watching his companion narrowly, he saw that she spotted the bureau as soon as she crossed the threshold; he knew, too, that she would not draw his attention to it until she had affected to inspect the other things. When at last she came to the corner in which it stood, she pretended to pass it by as an object of no particular interest; then paused.

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"Rather a quaint old thing!" she remarked patronizingly. "Nothing very exceptional about it, though, is there?"

"An excellent example of its period, ma'am," replied Bickmore, "and in splendid preservation. It belonged to the late Mr. Walkinshaw of this town, who was a collector of repute."

The lady showed more interest.

"Dear me!" she said. "What is it like—inside?"

Bickmore produced a key from his pocket, and unlocked and let down the flap. And keeping his watchful eye on his companion he saw hers go straight to a certain part of the top half of the revealed interior—where, as Bickmore well knew, there was a spring that released the secret drawer. But he showed no trace of having seen—instead, he began to expatiate on the beauties of the bureau. Suddenly, his visitor dropped into a chair close by.

"I—oh, dear me!" she gasped. "I feel—faint! Can—can you get me a glass of water?"

It was a long way from that upstairs room to the regions below, where drinking water was likely to be kept. But Bickmore laughed inwardly at being able to checkmate this very obvious move. The room in which they stood was one that he used as a sort of private office, and there was a corner cupboard in it from which he immediately produced a carafe of water and a glass. And as he crossed the floor with them he spoke, and unless his pretended customer was unusually obtuse she must have noted a slight touch of sarcasm in his tone.

"I have both brandy and whisky here, ma'am," said Bickmore. "And soda water. If you would prefer—?"

"Oh, no, thank you!" exclaimed the lady.

She took the glass and sipped a little of the water, murmuring something about a weak heart, always affected by climbing stairs; presently she made a quick recovery, and setting down the glass, smiled on Bickmore for the first time since she had entered the establishment. It was one of those smiles which are best described by the word wheedling.

"And how much do you want for this old bureau, Mr. Bickmore?" she asked in dulcet tones. "Do you know, I've taken quite a fancy to it."

"That bureau, ma'am, is not for sale," he replied, quietly. "Another person has an option on it."

That evening, looking in at the club for an hour or two, Bickmore ran into Strymer. Strymer made a face at him.

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"Well?" inquired Bickmore. "And what have I done?"

"Got me a very hot quarter of an hour this morning!" answered Strymer. "That's what you've done! The duchess turned up at my office, just before noon—she's come down here for a few days. Wanted to know what the so-and-so I meant by not carrying out her commission. Of course, I threw all the blame on you!"

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," replied Bickmore. "I daresay I can stand it. But I should think it would have been much more pertinent if the duchess had told you why she was so anxious to get hold of that particular piece of furniture."

"She did!" exclaimed Strymer. "She says it was once in her family. Belonged to her grandfather, on the maternal side—old Squire Camp—ages ago."

"Who told her that?"

"Old Walkinshaw, she says. Had to see him on some charitable business or other, not long before she went off to the Riviera, and he pointed out this bureau to her, and told her its history. What's more, she says that old Walkinshaw promised to leave the bureau to her when he died. See?"

"Well, he didn't."

"Of course he didn't!" agreed Strymer. "May have meant to, though. But he popped off all of a sudden. By the way, heard about his will?"

"Not a word," replied Bickmore. "Interesting?"

Strymer rubbed his hands.

"Left everything he had to the town!" he answered joyously. "A lot of it to the established charities, some to create new trusts, a certain amount for improvements, and that sort of thing. Very sporting of the old chap. But then, of course, he'd neither kith nor kin, as they say, and he'd certainly made his money here. Yes, that's it—all to the town. Postlethwaite, in Market Street, is sole executor, but they say he's little to do except to hand over the money to the mayor and corporation as trustees."

"Oh!" remarked Bickmore.

Strymer tapped the side of his nose and went to play bridge, and Bickmore turned into the reading room and looked at the newspapers.

"She'll come herself tomorrow!" he muttered. "Dead certain!"

And at eleven o'clock next morning the duchess came.

The duchess came openly, in her smartest car. Bickmore, catching sight of its grandeur, resolved to play his part like a man, and

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hurried to his door; the duchess, handsome and debonaire, smiled broadly at him.

"Well, Mr. Bickmore!" she said, jollily, "I've come to see you about that old bureau. Lot of bother you've given me, too! Or it's given me!—"

"The latter supposition is more correct, Your Grace," replied Bickmore. "I should be sorry to give Your Grace any trouble."

"Oh, well, I suppose it was my own fault for mistaking the date of Mr. Walkinshaw's sale," said the duchess graciously. "I always did get hopelessly mixed about dates, and when one's far away from home, you know, eh? Of course, if Mr. Strymer had got my telegram in time, there'd have been no bother at all—he'd have bought the thing in for me. But now look here, Mr. Bickmore, what's this Mr. Strymer tells me?—that somebody has an option on the bureau?"

"The option has not been taken up," replied Bickmore.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she exclaimed. "That's lucky—for me, isn't it? Then of course you'll sell it to me?"

"Perhaps Your Grace would like to see the bureau?" suggested Bickmore.

He led the duchess through the shop and up various flights of stairs to the room in which the much-desired piece of furniture was housed. Once inside, with the door closed, he waved his hand towards the corner by the desk.

"Your Grace recognizes it?"

The duchess smiled at the bureau as a mother might have smiled on a long-lost and just-recovered child.

"Oh, of course!" she exclaimed. "Delightful old thing, isn't it? Used to belong to my grandfather, you know. And Mr. Walkinshaw promised to leave it to me."

"But he didn't."

"Well, the poor man died so suddenly," said the duchess. "Otherwise—but come now, Mr. Bickmore, I'm so pleased that the other person didn't take up his option! Now, how much?"

"Your Grace is extremely anxious to secure possession," said Bickmore, with a look at the duchess which made her start, and glance with sudden attention at him. "But I am in possession—and sometimes I buy things which I don't care to part with. I, too, am a bit of a collector. And collectors, Your Grace, have their —eccentricities. Fads, you know. Now—why, frankly, is Your Grace so very desirous of buying this bureau?"

The duchess gave Bickmore another look. It expressed a good

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deal—and it suddenly became transformed into an expression of ingenuous candor that would have suited a stage milkmaid.

"Mr. Bickmore!" she exclaimed. "I'll tell you! Between ourselves! There's something in that bureau that belongs to me!"

"Yes," said Bickmore, quietly. "There is also something that belongs to—somebody else!"

"To—somebody else? To—whom?" she inquired anxiously.

"To the late Mr. Walkinshaw's executor," said Bickmore. "Listen, Your Grace. Suppose I tell you what is in that bureau. There is a secret drawer, and in the secret drawer there is a small parcel, done up in tissue paper and soft leather. Within it is what looks like a diamond necklace. There is also a document signed by Your Grace acknowledging the receipt of five thousand pounds borrowed by Your Grace from Mr. Walkinshaw. With the existence and whereabouts of these things Your Grace is familiar. But Your Grace is not aware that there is also in that parcel a certificate, signed by one of the leading jewel experts of London, in which he testifies that the alleged diamonds of the necklace are not diamonds at all, but—paste!"

The duchess, an eminently healthy and vigorous specimen of femininity, had collapsed into a convenient elbow chair by that time. She sat drumming her fingers on its arms and staring at Bickmore, silently. And Bickmore nodded at her.

"Cold, plain truth, Your Grace!" he said, icily. "Unpleasant fact!"

The duchess found her tongue at last.

"What—do you want?"

"I gave fifty guineas for the bureau, at the Walkinshaw sale," replied Bickmore. "As Your Grace is so anxious to have it, I will take sixty guineas for it. But," he added, as the duchess sprang to her feet, "on condition!"

"Condition?" exclaimed the duchess. "What condition?"

"Mr. Postlethwaite, whose offices are just round the corner, is sole executor of the late Mr. Walkinshaw's will," continued Bickmore. "If Your Grace will be good enough to go there and see him, and bring back to me a receipt showing that Your Grace has paid him five thousand pounds, the bureau and its contents——"

The duchess's eyes flashed.

"Otherwise," concluded Bickmore, slowly, "otherwise, much as I should regret it—"

The duchess went.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Photograph courtesy of Dast Magazine, Sweden

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Breathes there a man (or woman) who doesn't recognize the name "Arthur Conan Doyle" as the creator of the world's most popular private detective? Probably not. Though he tried to forget Sherlock Holmes, insisting that his later works and avocations were more important, Conan Doyle's fate was that he be remembered as the author of the Holmes tales.

There is nothing I can say on the subject that hasn't been said—more eloquently, too—by critics and fans before me. If you are already among them, you need no convincing. I address myself here to those of you who think you know something of Sherlock Holmes (from movies, pastiches, spoofs, etc.) but who have never actually picked up a volume of the original Conan Doyle. I understand that you usually like your mysteries rough and raw, or American and very up-to-date, or some such choice that seems antithetical to the very idea of Sherlock Holmes, but I must insist: if you've never read the Holmes tales, you don't know what you're missing.

Consider this: how many other fictional creations have taken such a tenacious hold on the hearts and imaginations of readers—the world over, mind you—for nigh on a hundred years? You, for instance, may never have read a Conan Doyle story or novel that features the inestimable Sherlock Holmes. And yet, admit how much you

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know of him anyway. Who lived at 221B Baker Street?—and whose landlady was named Mrs. Hudson? Who kept his pipe tobacco in the toe of a Persian slipper, and who played a violin to relax? Whose exploits were chronicled by a loyal friend named John H. Watson, M.D.? Whose followers were—are—called the Baker Street Irregulars? Answer: the same man whose nemesis was the evil Dr. Moriarty—Sherlock Holmes. Holmes, the world's first consulting detective, a profession he devised as most suitable to his particular talents, and one that he certainly made his own.

If you think you already know a great deal about him, read the sixty novels and short stories, and surprise yourself with all the fascinating detail you now only suspect exists. Learn the truth behind the horror of the speckled band, and find out the whys and wherefores of the Red-Headed League, the blue carbuncle, the Hound of the Baskervilles . . . and much more!

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) was a master narrator, with a keen sense of the mysterious, the bizarre, the unexpected. The invention of the faithful biographer, Watson, was inspired. Here was a character whom readers could admire for his loyalty, his courage, his frank admiration of excellence (and of his roommate's extraordinary feats of deductive reasoning). Watson has an eye for a pretty damsel in distress, and he takes most people at face value. He is decent, fallible, likable—in short, the opposite, in so many ways, of Holmes. Watson can brag about Holmes in a way that Holmes, were he telling his own stories, could never do. Their friendship adds much to the saga, too, adding a vulnerability to Holmes's character that doesn't often come into play.

The plots are super, the characters are crisply drawn and compelling, the dialogue is true, and the Victorian milieu—murky pools of light from gas streetlamps, horse-drawn cabs, strange men and stranger customs (legacies of foreign lands under British rule), country estates and the bustling railroad stations required to reach them—is a delight.

H.R.F. Keating says of Doyle in *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers:* "Doyle's extraordinary gifts, for story-telling, for the sounding in us of primeval depths that respond to the mystery of the tale, for the creation of characters, sweep away all criticisms. Sherlock Holmes lives, and will live as long as there are books, or films, or television series, telethinks." I could not agree more.

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MYSTERY REVIEWS

It's safe to say that while Doyle wrote sixty stories featuring Sherlock Holmes, there are many, many more—stories and full-length books—that take Holmes as inspiration, and run with it.

Along these lines, four books have been sent to me recently to review. The first is **Sherlock Holmes: My Life and Crimes** by Michael Hardwick (Doubleday, $16.95, 208 pp., illustrated). Hardwick, who has authored several additions to the Sherlockian saga, has placed the retired Holmes in an armchair, and has handed him pen and paper. The result is this "memoir," which reveals—among other things—where Holmes was for those three years after he took a fall at the Falls. Holmes buffs know what I'm talking about; the rest of you might want to pass this up, at least until after you've read the stories themselves.

The same might be said of **The Unknown Conan Doyle: Uncollected Stories** by Arthur Conan Doyle (Doubleday, $14.95, 454 pp.), edited by John Michael Gibson and Richard Lancelyn Green. Here are thirty-three short stories in a single volume, ten of them never previously identified as having been written by Conan Doyle. This collection spans fifty years of the author's career, and for that reason alone it has historical meaning for Holmes buffs. Surprisingly—or not surprisingly, if you agree with Keating and myself—these are also highly entertaining and enjoyable, even though Sherlock is missing from the pages.

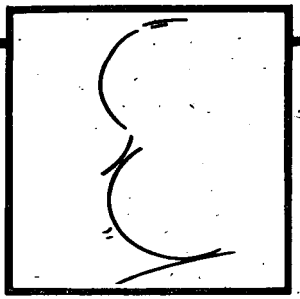
Next, there's something a bit different, for established Holmes buffs and newcomers alike. This is **The Hound of the Baskervilles** in a "Murder Dossier" format, a clever facsimile of letters, memoranda, photos, and assorted documents—compiled by editor Simon Goodenough—pertaining to the case. Because each of the documents is mentioned in the actual novel, one can "read" the novel by studying these papers; then one can untie the ribbon that holds the book together, and read the sealed solution in the back of the book. (Little, Brown, $19.95)

Finally there's **Sherlock Holmes Through Time and Space,** a collection of fifteen stories, edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh. The first story is actually a Conan Doyle tale, the final selection is one of Asimov's, and "In between," says Asimov in the introduction, "are 13 stories in which you will meet the spirit of Sherlock Holmes in the form of animals, robots, extraterrestrials, and so on." Illustrations make this a handsome volume. (Bluejay Books, $14.95, 355 pp.)

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Into the Night is an up-to-date, Los Angeles version of a favorite Alfred Hitchcock theme, that of the ordinary person who suddenly finds himself caught up in the midst of intrigue and danger.

The versions of the theme that *Into the Night* seems to have in mind are the charming romantic comedies *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) and *Young and Innocent* (1937), in both of which an unsuspecting young man and woman are thrown together in danger. In both movies the suspense is lightened by the opportunities for romantic comedy as the shared danger makes the characters increasingly attractive to one another.

The young man of *Into the Night* is a low-level aerospace engineer whose existence has been reduced to a sleepless, catatonic one by his humdrum work and unfaithful wife. He drives aimlessly out to the airport in the middle of the night and arrives just as Michelle Pfeiffer comes running for her life; she hops into his car, pursued by four Iranian hit men. She is young, blonde, fetching, fascinating, but not innocent. On the contrary, formerly a millionaire's mistress, she has just smuggled six priceless emeralds into the country.

Unable to go to the police lest they arrest her, Michelle flees with her young man through nighttime Los Angeles, closely pursued by both the Iranians and a French criminal who also wants the jewels.

Despite her checkered past, Michelle resembles Hitchcock's early heroines in her spunky bravery, her wit, and even her petite physique. As in Hitchcock, the inexperienced young man starts off as something of a clod and grows into a hero.

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Unfortunately, Jeff Goldblum as the aerospace engineer starts a bit too far back. In contrast to Michael Redgrave in *The Lady Vanishes,* who has a good deal of wit and class despite his innocence, Goldblum never shows much more than a certain doggedness. There is nothing wrong with the girl's having it all over him for resourcefulness—so did the perky Margaret Lockwood have it over Redgrave. But the young man needs to strike us as an ideal mate for the girl, and that just isn't the case here.



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Jeff Goldblum and Michelle Pfeiffer on the run.

On the other hand *Into the Night* surprisingly manages to preserve at least one of the conventions of the romantic thriller: the young couple's chaste relationship. Even when Michelle becomes desperate to keep the unwilling Goldblum by her side, she never uses sexual wiles to hold him. The movie moves through the profane Los Angeles world of sex shops and prostitutes, and sometimes resorts to nudity and vulgarity, but somehow the lovers are limited to a single, fleeting kiss. This restraint gives *Into the Night* a touch of class, raising it to satisfying entertainment if not Hitchcockian genius.

In **The Hit,** a British gangster revenge movie, Willie Parker testifies against his fellow robbers in exchange for an anonymous new life in Spain. Ten years later one of the men he put in prison is released. Soon hit man John Hurt and his callow young assistant show up. They seize Willie and set off across Spain for his rendezvous with death.

Things start to go wrong. There are necessary detours; at one point a Spanish girl has to be brought along; it is hot. Gradually the movie settles down to an almost novelistic study of its four characters, among them a seemingly unflappable, remorseless John Hurt as the hit man, and Terence Stamp as a transformed Willie who has become a reader of Hemingway and Spanish history. There may be more subtlety here than the situation really calls for, but *The Hit* has an offbeat authenticity that makes it worth seeing.

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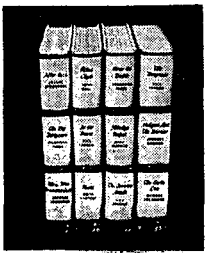
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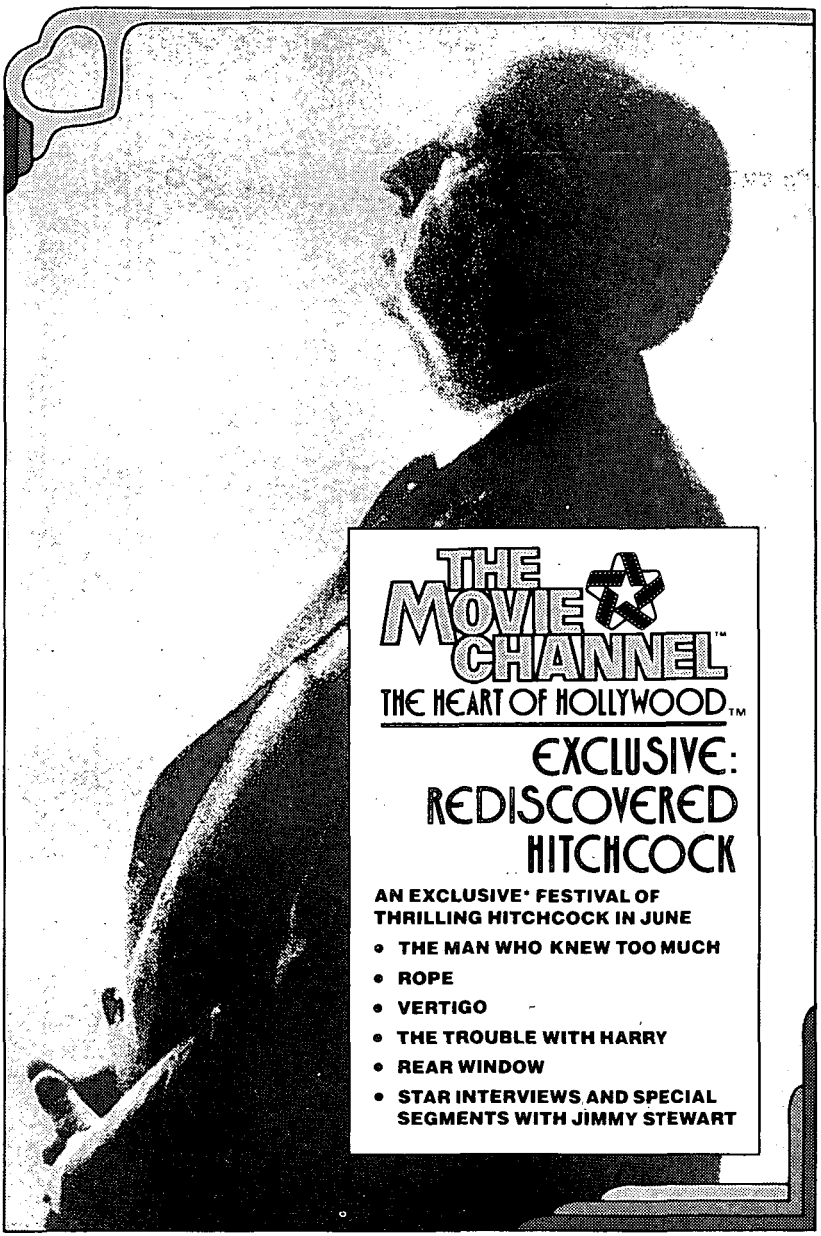
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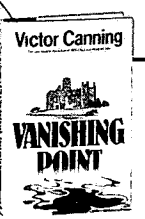
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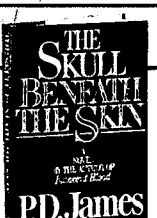
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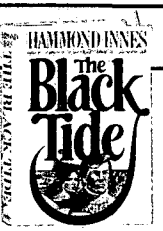
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